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Sink

ONCE UPON A TIME

PERRIN BRIAR

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SINK
Once Upon A Time

Perrin Briar

1.

IT WAS a fine job, and no mistake. Montgomery reached into the water and felt at the cold skin of the deceased—and probably *diseased*—body. A shiver went through him. He would never get used to that—the cold, claminess of dead flesh, swollen and puffy with water.

He suspected it was because one day it would be *his* skin that felt this way. It wouldn't be long before it did, he thought to himself. He was an old man. Death was the only thing left to look forward to. But Montgomery had been saying that for the past twenty years.

He expected every moment to be his last. The only tragedy—in his eyes—was that it never came, and so he spent his life in perpetual fear, waiting for the moment when something—or someone—would snatch his life from him.

Montgomery wore a mask over his mouth to prevent breathing in any fumes or disease that might emanate from the body. It wasn't right for someone living to have to go touching the bodies of those that were dead. Who knew what they had wrong with them. They weren't from this world. They were from the underworld, and that thought terrified Montgomery more than any other.

One half of the bodies was always puffy white with death. The other half—from the top of the head to the waist, was always scorched black and red raw, bubbled and harsh, their clothes burnt rags. The body had been ejected from the bowels of hell. There were two of them.

Montgomery pulled them out of the water into his boat. He piled the bodies one on top of the other. It was the only way he could fit them in his tiny boat. It lacked the respect the dead deserved to be treated with, but there was no avoiding that.

Montgomery picked up his oars and set them in the stirrups on either side of his boat. He placed the paddles into the water and bent forward, the paddles reaching back to begin pulling away.

A single bubble formed on the lake's surface. Montgomery peered over the side at it. The bubble popped. Montgomery leaned back on his bench and again pulled the oars through the water.

Pop! Pop!

More bubbles.

Montgomery felt a churning sensation in his stomach. He knew what was about to happen. He wished he'd worked faster so he could have been away from here by now. Then they would have been someone else's problem.

Bubbles erupted on the surface, rushing and frothing at the mouth. The lake was going rabid, and it always resulted in the same thing. More arrivals.

But this was unusual, happening with greater fervor. Hell *really* wanted to be rid of these corpses, Montgomery thought.

He fell back into the belly of his boat, eyes wide. The bubbling water grew more violent as the lake burped, retched, and reached across the surface toward him.

There was a bright red gleaming light from the floor of the lake. Montgomery seized the oars and bent his knees, preparing to row. He was going to leave. He'd just say the bodies must have come after he left with the two he'd found. In his fear he lost his grip, sending an oar floating to one side.

Montgomery reached over, stretching his fingertips for the lost oar. He could just about feel it with the tips of his fingers, and began reeling it in.

Montgomery was face to face with the surface of the lake now. His eyes boggled. The harsh red light illuminated a body, a calm face, that rose higher and higher toward the surface.

Montgomery pulled back, but his weight was off, and he fell into the lake. His boat rocked, but stayed upright. The water was ice cold.

Montgomery began kicking back toward the surface. He was arrested in his actions by the sight of not one, but three—no, *four!*—bodies rising toward the lake's surface. They looked like souls ascending to heaven. Perhaps that was what this world was compared to the hell they had formerly occupied.

Just as Montgomery breached, so too did the other bodies. Montgomery gasped for air, and floundered with his hands for the boat. One of the bodies nudged him with the top of their head. Montgomery ignored it and pulled himself up into the rowboat. He was panting, out of breath. He was too old for this.

He covered his face with his hands, unable to bring himself to look over the side, quivering. The lake was calm once again, the crickets and toads continuing their tuneless vigil.

Montgomery peered over the side. The final few bubbles popped into oblivion, leaving nothing but the faintest trace of half a dozen sets of vague ripples emanating out from the lake's center.

Eventually, Montgomery stopped shaking. He peered through his fingers, still clasped tight to his face, at the lake's surface. Where there had been no more bodies, there were now four. They floated on their backs, vacant expressions admiring the sky. Their eyes were closed and still wore clothes.

Montgomery blinked. He had never seen bodies like this before. They looked almost normal.

These bodies were not scorched. Somehow they had managed to avoid the worst of the flames of hell, and emerged up here, on God's green Earth, untouched. Montgomery crossed himself.

These things must truly be work of the devil, for them to come out of hell's own fiery void without a blemish. They must have been sent here by the great evil doer, Satan, sent here to test them, to destroy them, to slip amongst their number and do evil. Montgomery shivered.

He leaned over the side and picked up the missing oar, arms struggling under the weight. He prodded one of the floating figures—the man. There was no response, save for the body inching away from himself.

Montgomery cursed himself and put the oars back in the water. He turned around. Dead was dead. Even from hell. Montgomery usually liked the hollow thudding sounds of the boat as he rowed, but not tonight. Tonight they sounded ominous.

Montgomery didn't really want to touch these bodies, didn't need the extra work. But it would have been too obvious to whoever took the next shift that he had intentionally left the bodies here. And what a storm that would cause.

He sighed, grimaced, and reached over the side. He hooked his hands under the man's arms and pulled him into the boat. If he was alive, surely that would have woken him up. But the man didn't stir a muscle.

Montgomery did the same with the other bodies, and laid them atop the first two crisp bodies he'd found. This had to be a record haul. He ensured to tie each of their wrists and ankles together with rope, and laid them

down. It was believed bodies from hell might awaken and take their vengeance upon the living. It had never happened, but evidence never killed superstitious beliefs.

Montgomery wiped the sweat from his brow. It was not caused by exertion—the air was damp. He cast around and listened. Was it just him, or did the world seem even more silent than usual? He got the depressing thought nature was watching him, paying attention to his every move.

Montgomery decided to get the job done, and as fast as he could. He pulled on the oars with a strength and speed and desperation he hadn’t felt in a long time. He hadn’t even had to do the worst part yet. That was still to come.

2.

THE BOAT coarsed over the lake in strong pulsing movements, stroke by stroke. Montgomery fancied no one else in town could have pulled the rowboat any faster than he currently was. His form was perfect. Funny how the body's performance kicked in when its survival was at stake.

Montgomery steered the boat through a large gaping rent in the side of the mountain. It was triangular in shape and looked like something had cleaved a hole right in the earth.

Montgomery hated it. He hated the look of it, hated the way it made him feel. Afraid. Mortally afraid. Despite having done this job a hundred times before, his feelings toward that cave never wavered.

Montgomery had never seen unscorched bodies emerge from the lake before. This was a first. Firsts were never a good omen. Firsts were a sign of something new taking place. A reversal in the world order. New meant danger. New meant intrigue. New meant death. But in Montgomery's mind, everything led to death. He was just that way inclined.

He held his lantern over the side and cast the light around. It did little to break through the darkness, the small orb of light illuminating nothing beyond the water's edge.

Montgomery hopped from the boat and into the shallow water. He thought he heard something and brought the lantern around. He didn't see anything. He wouldn't with this piddling light. He made munching motions with his mouth, noises like he was chewing cud. A sure sign he was nervous.

He gripped the prow of the boat with his swollen knuckles and pulled it onto shore. Then he reached into the bottom and pulled out the bodies. The unscorched bodies seemed heavier now, and if he didn't miss his guess, he would have said they were getting warmer too. He decided to ignore it and get on with his job.

Montgomery laid the bodies along the shore, just shy of the water's edge. He glanced at the bodies and considered just leaving them there, but he knew he couldn't. Someone would come across them and he'd get

blamed for it. He sighed and bent down. He'd begin with the scorched bodies first. They were what he was used to.

He hooked one hand under each scorched body's armpit and dragged them across the ground, deeper into the cave. They didn't put up much resistance, though one of them got snagged on an outcrop of rock and seemed unwilling to be pulled off it.

The tunnels were like a maze in these caves. It was easy to get turned around and confused. You could spend weeks wandering around without knowing where you were going. That's if you could survive there that long. There was little in the way of food or sustenance.

Everyone in town knew someone who had gone wandering in the caves, never to emerge again. They believed they became spirits that haunted this place. Some said you could hear their cries if you listened closely enough. Montgomery had no such intention of listening, and blocked his ears of any sound.

He came to a clearing within a large cavern, a few boulders acting as decoration. Montgomery lay the bodies down in the center. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He did not make the mistake of attempting to identify his audience in the darkness. If something was there he wouldn't have been able to stop it in any case. He was better off not knowing. If it did attack, hopefully it would finish him off quickly.

Still, he was scared. He wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until he was back in the pub and staring at the stain of the wall that morphed into nothing but friendly shapes.

Montgomery wound through the tunnels back to the lake, and the bodies he still had to transport. When he came within sight of the unscorched bodies, he got quite a shock.

One of the bodies—the elder female—lay on its side, a few feet from where he had positioned it. Had something come and pulled at the body? Possibly. But if it had, there were no longer any tracks in the soft wet sand.

Montgomery's throat felt dry. He steeled his nerve and did what any sane man would do in such a situation. He ignored it. He had a job to do. Scratching his head about a moved body wasn't going to get the job done. But he wouldn't touch the female body, not until he had no choice.

He took the elder unscorched man by the wrists and dragged him backward, his boots making lines in the dirt. Montgomery kept his eyes

firmly ahead, in the direction he was going. His peripheries, focused in the direction of the mysterious moving female body, were on high alert.

Montgomery ordinarily believed the dead should be respected, no matter whether they rose from hell or descended from heaven. But he couldn't prevent himself from carelessly dropping the man's arms, letting them strike the ground, when he deposited the body.

There was no way he was going to hang around any longer than he needed to. He stood up from his crouched position and hustled back to the water's edge, almost taking a wrong turn on the way.

"Calm down, Monty," he said to himself. "This ain't no time to panic."

He was relieved to find the three remaining bodies were right where they should be. He took hold of the young unscorched boy and girl by an arm each and pulled them along the wet sand.

He would normally have taken just one at a time, but this wasn't any normal time. He deposited them beside the larger man, who he was also relieved to find hadn't moved a muscle.

"Just so," Montgomery said, a smile tinging his lips.

He turned and headed back into the tunnels and felt the familiar sense of relief and joy at having almost finished the job. He hustled back, a near skip in his step. He returned to the waterfront and found…

Nothing.

The elder female body was gone. The sand was where it should have been. The water gently lapped against the sand. Everything was in place. Save the dead body.

Dead body.

Montgomery spun around, flinching back in anticipation of someone striking him. But there was no one there.

A dead body had come back to life. Something new. Something dangerous.

"To hell with this," Montgomery said.

He climbed into the boat, rowed back out into the lake, left his boat at the jetty without tying it up, and ran into town. He entered the nearest pub and ordered his favorite glass of brown.

The stain on the wall that had always brought him solace with its various morphing shapes, no longer did. Each time he glanced at it, it was fixed in the same unflinching outline.

A dead body, lying in a position he had not set. And her eyes were open. She was looking directly at him.

Montgomery's jittering mouth, missing so many teeth, opened. He laughed to himself, beginning as a titter, before working up into a maniacal roar. It sounded odd even to him, even stranger to the bar flies who had never heard Montgomery so much as chuckle all his years.

"Montgomery," the barman said with genuine concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Montgomery said, stifling his laughter by biting on a knuckle. "'To hell with this,' I said. 'To hell with this'!"

The barman smiled, before turning to look at the other drinkers. The joke was lost on him.

In the caves Montgomery had said, "To hell with this." But now he realized the dead hadn't gone to hell. Instead, hell had come to them. Isn't that the funniest thing?

3.

BRYAN’S EYES fluttered open. He’d had the most vivid dream.

He’d imagined himself in a giant cave, the sounds bouncing off the hard stone walls, echoing endlessly and without end in the corners of his mind. He remembered the press of sand against his face, leaving an imprint.

He’d been aware of a man, his features unclear and indistinct, blurry and out of focus like an early model camera. He thought the man to be old. It was in the way he moved, the way he comported himself. But it could have just as easily have been a boy.

Bryan was shocked to find himself lying on the ground, peering up at a jagged ceiling of natural rock knives. The ground at his back was hard. And there was less grit here. Had the place he recalled been real? He would swear he’d been moved.

The last thing he remembered was being in a quicksand whirlpool that dragged him under the earth, a whirlpool he had willingly thrown himself in. It had taken him lower and lower, into the clutches of the abyss below…

It had gone dark. He’d been worried, concerned for Zoe, Cassie and Aaron. He lost his grip on their hands. He didn’t know where he was going, but he had some faith that the sinkhole would take them to a better place—and not the shining white one in the sky with harp-playing winged creatures. He wanted to go somewhere better than the last world, that had been eviscerated by its own occupants.

He remembered very little after that, other than snatches of images and sounds. What had made him pass unconscious, he didn’t know. Perhaps it had something to do with the sand’s pressure. It might have been too much for him. Maybe too much for the others too.

The others.

Where were they?

Bryan moved to lift his arms to push himself up, but found they would not obey him. Was he injured? He concentrated on his limbs and then the rest of his body. He felt a little numb, his body exhausted, but no pain. He

applied pressure to his arms. Something was wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He'd been restrained.

He moved his eyes left to right, checking the peripheries as best he could. He commanded himself to lift his head, but it wouldn't budge. He could hardly move. He froze when he saw something out the corner of his eye.

Clothes. On bodies. He couldn't tell their shape and size, but they must have been the others. They were beside him, and he felt himself relax with relief. If they were together, things couldn't be that bad.

Bryan needed to rest. He didn't like the idea of letting himself go, to fade into that nothingness that was unconsciousness. But there was nothing he could do in his current state anyway. His eyes rolled back, despite his best efforts to keep them open, and he fell unconscious again.

4.

HIS EYES opened. Faster, and with more energy this time. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he could already feel the difference in his body. He turned his head to one side. The world swam in his vision. His head hurt like someone had been swinging hammers at it. He preferred the numbness.

His head felt heavy on his flimsy neck and didn't react well to his commands. But it did react, and that was an important improvement over the first time he'd woken up. He was in a cavern, large, with craggy walls. He remembered the two bodies he'd seen earlier out the corner of his eyes and turned to them. His breath caught in his throat.

There was blood. A lot of it. Dried and burnt, the bodies unrecognizable.

Bryan recalled the swirling miasma of the red hot magma and boulders the size of cars being tossed around like leaves in a strong wind. That could have done this. It *had* done this.

Then Bryan shook his head. No. This couldn't be Cassie and Aaron. He rejected the idea. These mashed up bodies couldn't possibly belong to anyone he knew or loved.

Tears stung his eyes and quivered, threatening to spill down his face, but never quite carrying through. His face scrunched up and he heard a low whine escape his throat, the cry of desperation.

These lifeless forms were the kids. They hadn't escaped. They hadn't gotten out. He had escaped with his life, largely untouched, while the kids had been fried to a crisp, beyond recognition. He couldn't live without Cassie. Not like this. He couldn't live with himself.

A rage overtook him. He forced himself up, difficult with his arms and legs tied, first into a crouched position, and then up onto his knees. He edged toward the bodies, the stench of their charred flesh stinging his nose. He fell upon them, pulling them close with his chin. He cried into them.

They never got a chance to be a family. They never got a chance to love each other the way they deserved. They had so much left to experience and

give to one another. All these feelings of pain and regret poured out of Bryan and into the two bodies he clutched tightly to himself.

“I’m sorry,” Bryan said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

There wasn’t anything else he could think to say. What else could he say?

And then he noticed their hands.

They were thick and powerful, strong, like they were used to physical labor. Aaron and Cassie hadn’t had a hard day’s work in their lives. They were students, used to studying at school with pen and paper. They would not have hands like this. Then how did they come to have them?

The obvious answer struck him like a thunder bolt, and hope swelled in his chest at the ramifications.

Because they weren’t Aaron and Cassie. They were someone else.

But who?

Bryan thought back to the bodies of the miners who had died in the previous world, and their funeral ceremony. They’d been lowered into a pit of magma, what was believed to be a passage to another world. How right the miners had been, though they could not have expected it to be this world.

And suddenly it all made sense. The old man he’d thought he’d dreamed, the water, the sand, this cavern. It was all the same thing. The process of laying the dead bodies to rest. Despite not having the same scorch marks, Bryan had been mistaken for dead, as a cousin to these unfortunate deformed bodies beside him.

Then if these bodies were not Cassie and Aaron, where were they?

Bryan sat back on his heels and looked around. His heart leapt.

Aaron and Cassie lay to one side, right beside where he’d lain. Why couldn’t he have looked in this direction first? Then he wouldn’t have had such a scare!

“Cassie!” Bryan said. “Aaron!”

He fell to his knees and edged closer. He checked them over, but found nothing wrong with them save a few grazes to their bare skin. They were in one piece, their hair wind blown from their faces. They appeared perfectly healthy.

Except they were unconscious.

Bryan put his face to Cassie’s cheek and nudged her.

“Cassie?” he said. “Cassie? Can you hear me? It’s Dad. Are you awake?”

She obviously wasn’t awake. Bryan lowered the delicate skin of his neck to her nose. He could feel her breath. He checked Aaron. He was breathing too.

Finally, Bryan could breathe too, letting out a lungful of relieved air. He smiled, unable to hide his happiness. He hugged them close and gently nudged them with his shoulder.

“You need to wake up,” Bryan said. “Come on. Get up.”

Aaron and Cassie muffled, grumbling under their breath.

Bryan paused. He thought he’d heard something from one of the tunnels that branched off the cavern they were lying in. It began as a low rumble, vibrating the air and making it quiver. It emanated from the darkness of one of the tunnels. Bryan eyed one tunnel after another, but couldn’t identify which one the sound was originating from.

It could have come from any direction.

What made it worse was the sound reverberated off the walls in Bryan’s cavern. It sounded like it came from the left, but when he turned his head, it sounded like it was coming from the right.

How was he meant to avoid something when he didn’t even know where it was coming from? He might escape, but end up running directly at the creature. It sounded big, whatever it was.

“Get up,” Bryan said to the kids, his voice low. “We have to go.”

The growl from the mystery tunnel grew louder. It was coming closer. Bryan couldn’t pick the kids up with his hands and feet tied.

“Damn it!” Bryan said.

He turned and shuffled toward a large rock on his knees. He was moving too slowly, so he got to his feet and hopped. He dived behind the rock and waited, hoping the creature hadn’t seen him. He wouldn’t wait to find out.

A small rock protruded from the dirt, half buried. It had a sharp edge on the top. Bryan turned his back and lowered himself onto it. He rubbed his restraints against it, sawing through it. He felt the strands snapping, coming loose, the heat rising against the skin of his wrists.

Where had Zoe gotten to? He hadn’t seen her since they had entered the Passage in the magma world, what felt like another lifetime. Could she have been taken to another world? Could she have ended up somewhere

else? Somewhere far away? He didn’t know. He couldn’t worry about that, not now. He needed to focus on saving the kids.

Bryan felt the rope give way. He massaged his wrists with his hands. It felt good to be free of the restraints. He leaned forward and began to do the same with his ankles.

If he could get loose he might still have time to get the kids free before the creature found them. There hadn’t been a sound from the tunnels for the past few minutes and-

Bryan froze. No growl. No grumble. Nothing. In his recent experience, that was never a good thing.

A puff of dust rose from a sharp, strong exhalation from a large nostril. Bryan caught the stench of reeking meat. The creature’s diet. It didn’t bode well.

Bryan daren’t turn to look over the boulder. He didn’t want to be there. He didn’t want to see or hear what the creature was going to do. Not if Bryan didn’t stand a chance of stopping it. He found himself doing what many prey in the wild did.

He froze.

5.

IT TURNED out freezing was the best thing Bryan could have done.

The creature stared directly at him, its large eyes piercing him to his soul, pinning him in place. Bryan had never been so terrified. Even his breaths came short and shallow. Luckily his bladder was already empty. The monster turned, the ground shaking with every step.

It wasn't the first time Bryan had seen such a monster. How could it be here now? Had they gone backward? Back to an earlier world? Was that even possible? He supposed anything was possible when you didn't completely understand the rules of the place you found yourself.

What was Bryan going to do? Wrestle the kids from the mouth of this huge beast? No. That wasn't going to happen. He would end up getting himself as well as the kids killed. He needed to watch what the monster did. And if it bent down to eat the kids? Then he would distract the monster to give the kids a little more time to come round.

He'd race through the tunnels, getting the monster to chase him. He'd almost certainly end up lost, and in all likelihood, eaten, but at least the kids might get away.

The monster bent down, its huge head sniffing the unconscious children. Its great dripping tongue protruded from its mouth and ran over its sharp teeth and thick lips, and then over the scorched bodies on the floor, covering them in a thick film of sticky saliva. It could taste their blood, no doubt, and would be the first on the menu.

For the first time since finding the kids, he prayed they wouldn't wake up. Not right then. It was the worst possible time to regain consciousness.

The great reptile lowered its head further, and for a moment Bryan thought it was going to consume the scorched bodies, but it didn't. It took another step forward, fully extended its tail, and bent down to scoop up one scorched body in each of its short, powerful claws. It wasn't careful with them, and let their heads drag along the ground.

The creature carried the bodies, with them swinging in its arms, down the same tunnel it must have entered through, its footsteps heavy and foreboding. Soon, it was gone.

Bryan emerged from his hiding place and ran toward the kids' prostrate forms. How could they still be unconscious after what had just happened to them? Had they been poisoned? Or struck with something? Why was it he was awake and walking around while they were still like this? Perhaps size had something to do with it.

He shook them, more violently this time. The kids' bodies flopped all over the place, but did not wake. He would have to carry them somewhere safe. Soon the monster would be back to take them away too. He couldn't let that happen.

Bryan bent down and scooped his arms under Cassie's knees and neck. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him toward a random tunnel. He stopped and put Cassie down. He wanted to take her farther away, but first he needed to get Aaron to safety too.

He turned to run back and get Aaron, and froze once he laid eyes on what was present inside the cavern. He crept back into the tunnel, and pressed his back to the wall, and let out a mouthful of air, silently.

The creature was there. How it had managed to creep into the main chamber so stealthily, Bryan didn't know. But there it was, crouched over Aaron's body.

The great beast peered down at the single body on the ground and looked around. It looked confused. It seemed to think there should have been another body there. It sniffed the ground, but couldn't see any sign of it. It contented itself with just the one it had now. It bent down and performed the same careful procedure of picking Aaron up using in its front claws.

The monster turned, its great long tail whipping out in a wide arc. Bryan pulled back just in time before it almost struck him.

Now here was a pretty pickle.

Bryan didn't like to leave Cassie by herself, but he couldn't let the monster take Aaron either. Who knew what it might do to him. He could carry Cassie on his back, but he might just end up feeding her to the monster by mistake. Plus, she would slow him down, making it difficult for him to escape with Aaron.

"Crap!" Bryan said out loud.

He didn't like it, but Cassie had a much better chance of survival if she stayed here. So would he and Aaron. He picked up a stick and wrote in the dirt: STAY HERE.

He tossed the stick aside and jogged back into the wide open cavern. He crossed to the tunnel the creature had entered. Bryan slowed down and began to edge inside.

6.

THE CREATURE was loud, its grunts and biting snarls echoing down the tunnel. With each sound, Bryan paused, pressing himself against the wall. The sound came suddenly, from nowhere, as if they emanated from right before him. There was a light at the end of the corridor, and the walls were damp with slime.

Bryan edged closer to the light. Once he got to it, he peered inside. It looked like the perfectly lit scene of a horror play. The creature's large muscular back was moving, blocking Bryan's view.

There were a pair of rocks in front of the door on either side. If he got to one of those he'd be able to see what was going on. But that meant stepping into the light. He remembered the beast could only see movement, not anything in light.

Bryan watched the monster carefully and rushed to hide behind the boulder. Not a second too soon, as the monster turned in Bryan's direction.

It picked up one of the burnt corpses and hefted it. It put the body down somewhere, taking care to place it just so. The beast appeared to be putting a great deal of effort into the activity, requiring it to focus.

In the light, it was easier to make out the details of the creature. It had a long snout with large pointy teeth and short front legs with vicious claws. One was badly chipped. It had a long tail and a crest on the top of its head that stretched all the way down his back to the tip of his long tail.

Bryan could only see what he could because of the streaks of light that came in through a hole in the roof, cast by what appeared to be a beautiful blue sky.

Bryan moved around the boulder, taking care to place his feet so as not to disturb the creature. There was a disgusting noise, nothing at all to do with the growls the monster made. Bryan couldn't put his finger on what it was… Until he saw it with his own eyes.

It was a machine. A modern-looking contraption, but with elements of something that would not have looked out of place in a torture garden. It had sharp spikes and razor sharp edges, a vicious machine used to hack and slash.

Bryan crept closer, and watched as the creature very delicately and carefully slid the scorched body onto a spike, like a small cloth puppet onto a finger.

The monster moved to one side, coming to a large pedal. Its footsteps shook the cavern, making small rocks dive from the roof and dust rain down on Bryan's head. The monster lifted its giant muscular leg and placed it on the large flat pedal. It exercised its huge muscles and pressed up and down, pumping. The machine came to life.

However advanced this machine was, it didn't have access to electricity. The giant creature had to provide its own power. Bryan couldn't believe what he was seeing. A monster operating a machine? He pinched himself. He felt it. He wasn't dreaming. What was going on?

Then he saw the horrific processes the machine was capable of. The body began to spin gently on its turntable and, as it did, a series of sharp knives descended from the ceiling, moving in concentric circles.

The knives were attached to an intricate mobile of shiny metal rods that bent and flexed around metal joints. It reminded Bryan of the innate intricacy of long spider legs. They moved in and out, back and forth, up and down, performing a dance to which Bryan had no idea was their purpose.

They came closer and closer to the lifeless body that spun on its squeaking turnstile. Then, finally, Bryan could see what they were going to do. They inched closer to the cadaver, until they pierced its skin and inserted themselves deep into its flesh. Still the body kept turning, the knives, sharp as anything Bryan had ever seen, slicing at the meat like it was paper.

They cleaved the flesh from the body cleaner and with greater efficiency than Bryan had ever witnessed, even from a professional butcher. Thick congealed blood dripped onto the platform and rolled into a large bowl. The flesh peeled and dropped from the bones like a seed from a grape.

Saliva dribbled from the dragon's thick moist lips, splattering across the floor. The sight of the blood and smell of the flesh should have driven it berserk, but it remained calm, restrained. It continued to pump at the pedal and watched the body turn, the knives doing their work. Finally, with just a few chips to the bones, the skeleton was all that remained of the scorched man, his flesh stripped clean from his body.

Bryan was certain that in no world, in no culture, would anyone have imagined the afterlife to consist of such turmoil as this. It was beyond the realm of imagination. This was clearly not heaven. It wasn't hell either, but simply another world, with its own rules and limitations. Bryan was certain he could never get used to such a place if such things were routine.

Still the creature did not stop pumping its pedal, up and down its leg went. The pedestal turned and the skeleton was lifted into the air, continuing to spin. Another piece of metal hooked into the frame, and it slid to the floor, hanging beside a twin skeleton.

There were a dozen of them, lined up like fancy dress costumes. It was merely the front line of dozens like it. They were all grinning. Some had missing ribs, cracked skulls and bent jaws, but they were largely in one piece.

Another arm began to lower down from the ceiling. It held a small box that blinked red. It approached the newest skeleton before savagely shoving itself into the chest cavity. Something squirted out of the arm, some kind of sticky material that fixed the box in place.

Finally, the creature stopped pressing the pedal. The platform continued to turn, gradually slowing, the remaining metal arms retracting up into the ceiling. The monster approached the bowl of blood and meat, what Bryan now recognized as a food trough, bent down, and began to feed.

Bryan was still recovering from what he'd just witnessed. He couldn't have seen what had just happened in front of him. He couldn't have. He must have been mistaken.

Next would be the second scorched man. And then it would be Aaron's turn if Bryan couldn't get him out of there in time. It wouldn't take long for the monster to finish its meal. If he was going to act, he needed to do it soon.

Bryan peered around the boulder at Aaron. His breath hitched in his throat.

Aaron was beginning to stir.

7.

THE MONSTER'S back was to Bryan as it gorged itself on the meat. It was ravenous. It was surprising to Bryan it could have waited so long to feed. It was slurping, dropping chunks of food over the floor. Its long tongue wiped at the bowl to get every last morsel.

Bryan turned to Aaron. He needed to warn Aaron to stop moving. If he didn't, the monster was going to see he wasn't dead and, presumably, kill him. There was something very sinister, deliberate and routine about this whole setup. Bryan didn't like it. The monster was simply going through the motions, doing what it had always done.

What it had been trained to do.

Bryan got down on his hands and knees and crawled toward Aaron, making slow, deliberate movements. He got to Aaron and then lay down beside him, their noses no more than an inch apart. The monster seemed content with its meal.

"Aaron," Bryan whispered.

He didn't move.

But the monster did. It turned to look in Bryan's direction. He lay still, unmoving, and hoped the monster wouldn't come investigating. He waited, not daring to check. Then he heard more munching and slurping. The monster was feeding again. Its tongue wiped around the bowl. It must have almost finished.

Aaron was still unconscious. Whatever movements he made earlier appeared to have been unconscious ones. Bryan would have to carry him away as he had Cassie.

Bryan looked up. The monster was still licking his food bowl. Perhaps his sense of smell was so strong that no matter how much he licked the bowl, he could never completely remove the scent of blood clean.

Bryan lifted himself up onto one shoulder, and then an elbow. He knelt at Aaron's head and bent down to lift him up. He never even got to brace the boy's weight. The monster had straightened up. Bryan's body turned to jelly and he hit the deck.

The creature's footsteps pounded the ground, thudding through Bryan's body like a second heartbeat. The monster arched its neck, its huge back bones popping.

Aaron began to stir once again.

Bryan's arm flashed out. He wrapped a hand over his mouth. Bryan felt Aaron stiffen beneath his grip. Aaron turned his head. Bryan felt the boy's lungs fill with oxygen, presumably to scream. Bryan pressed harder, forcing his hand over Aaron's mouth so he couldn't even breathe, never mind scream.

Aaron's eyes were wide, but they were alert and focused.

"Sh," Bryan mouthed.

From the creature's point of view, they would have looked like a pair of bodies, one piled on top of the other. At least, that was what Bryan was hoping.

He daren't say another word. Bryan's appearance had some effect on Aaron, and he calmed down, his eyes still wide as saucers. He knew that if Bryan was holding his hand over his face he was doing so for a very good reason.

And then he saw the reason, over Bryan's shoulder. His body tensed again. Bryan strengthened his arm, holding Aaron tight. If the creature had to take one of them, he was going to make sure it was himself, though he would ensure to give the monster a run for his money too.

The creature pressed his snotty nostrils into Bryan's back, the stench of blood and guts from its recent meal like a thick cloud. Some of the blood wiped off on Bryan's clothes. The creature licked it. Bryan was both disgusted and terrified.

The monster reached down with its short arms—still almost the length of a fully grown man—and picked the second scorched man up. His limbs hung lifelessly as the creature carried the body over to the machine and began its meat harvesting process all over again.

Bryan slowly released his hand, giving Aaron back control of his mouth. Bryan slowly began to sit up, focusing on the creature. He must have had a million questions, but he knew right then wasn't the time to ask.

Bryan nodded to the boulder behind him, to the one he'd hidden behind when watching the monster's horrific display.

The knives were coming down from the ceiling in their effortless dance, entered the corpse, and began hacking at the flesh. The blades made swift scything movements.

Aaron and Bryan made it to the boulder, but still neither of them spoke. They crept down the tunnel, feet silent as the grave. Only once they entered the wide open space of the cavern did they slow.

“Where are we?” Aaron said in a low whisper.

“In a cave,” Bryan said.

“Oh really, you think?” Aaron said. “Where’s Mom?”

“I don’t know,” Bryan said. “I woke here and she wasn’t there.”

“She must be around here somewhere,” Aaron said. “What about Cassie?”

“I found her,” Bryan said. “I tried to get you both out of here, but I ran out of time and could only get her out.”

“Where is she?” Aaron said.

“In a tunnel,” Bryan said. “This way. Come on.”

8.

FINDING the tunnel was very easy. It was directly opposite the path they took to get to the monster's torture cavern. It was even easier to find where he had deposited Cassie. The difficult part was knowing where she had gone.

"Well?" Aaron said. "Where is she?"

"She was right here," Bryan said.

"Are you sure you left her here?" Aaron said.

"Positive," Bryan said.

"A lot of these tunnels do look the same," Aaron said.

"No, it's this one," Bryan said.

He pointed to the message he'd written in the dirt. STAY HERE.

"She just ignored me," Bryan said.

"Imagine that," Aaron said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"As per freaking usual," Bryan said.

A great roar went up. The monster had just learned his final course was missing. And by sound of it, he really loved his dessert.

9.

ZOE RECALLED a rush of sand up her nostrils, forcing a path into her brain. She could hardly breathe. She must have passed out because the next thing she knew, she was in a wet place, soaked to the bone. Then she was in a dry place, lying on a pair of reeking bodies, their stench washed out only by a rinse of water. Zoe assumed it must have been a nightmare.

It's funny how you could do that sometimes, how you could know you were in a dream even while you were still inside it. But toward the end it had been too real, too vibrant, too difficult to wave off as a mere dream.

She'd been lying on her back on a harsh rock when she'd become conscious again. When she was young she'd had a cheap mattress that resembled the Himalayas, and it was that thought that had stirred her from her dream.

She forced herself to get up. She'd stumbled, falling to her knees, before getting back to her feet again. She leaned against a wall and heard someone coming. Who, she didn't know. In all honestly, she didn't care. She just wanted to get away from them. If there was one thing she'd learned about being in these underground worlds, it was that she knew she couldn't trust the locals.

There were good people, of course, but there were also many bad ones. They had grown up in a world a far cry from the one Zoe was used to. There was no telling who they were and what they really wanted. She wanted to get away from whoever the figure coming toward her was.

Zoe stumbled toward a tunnel and braced herself against the craggy surface. Her head swam and she couldn't see straight. She didn't know where she was going or what she was doing. She thought the man was heading toward her. She turned and headed deeper into the cave.

No matter how deep or fast she went, the man behind her was always hot on her heels, his footsteps echoing off the hard craggy walls. He kept up with her no matter how fast she went.

Zoe tried to remember where she was going, how many corners she'd turned, and in which direction, keeping a running tally of *left, right, left,*

left, right, straight forward, right, third on the left… But she soon ran into trouble. She got muddled and couldn't recall the correct order.

She strengthened her resolve. She didn't need to worry about that right then. She needed to escape the man who was still chasing her, whoever he was, and get somewhere safe.

He was still hot on her heels. Zoe kept going, kept forcing herself on. If she didn't, and she stopped, she'd never find Bryan and the kids again.

There was a rushing, roaring sound that Zoe recognized immediately. Finally, some luck in this place. She came to a large open space. In the center was a cascading waterfall. But it wasn't just one waterfall, but three combined into one. A mist escaped to one side, rising like a cloud.

Zoe approached the water's edge, fell to her knees, cupped her hands, and splashed the ice cold water over her face and neck. Her headache flashed behind her eyes, but it was worth it.

She was wide awake now. It was hard not to be when doused with freezing cold water. She was alive, her brain cells firing on all cylinders. She had a series of revelations all at once.

First, the man hadn't been following her. If he had, he would have been here by now, grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. Then what were the footfalls she'd heard? Surely someone had been following her?

She chuckled, putting a hand to her face. She almost felt the blood rush to her cheeks. It was herself, her own footsteps bouncing off the walls, reflecting back at her. She had been running from herself. They had only stopped when she had entered this large cavern, where the sounds didn't bounce or reflect back to her eardrums. There was no man, only herself.

The second revelation was in relation to her recent memories. Though still fuzzy and warped by light and sound, they snapped into focus. There were others lying on the sand beside the water, just as there had been other bodies lying on top of her in the boat. Those lined up on the beach could not have gotten there by themselves. The lines were too uniform. Someone had put them there. But why? For what purpose? It couldn't have been for anything good.

The third revelation was the biggest, and the most shocking. She stood up and stepped out of the crevice she'd stumbled into at the water's edge. It was a giant clawed footprint. One of its nails alone was as big as Zoe's hand.

"What the…?" Zoe said out loud.

She'd seen tracks like this before. In the first world they'd come to.

"But it can't be…" Zoe said.

There was a roar, loud and vibrant, echoing from the tunnels on her left. She got up and ran to the tunnel entrance, but didn't enter it. Zoe could tell by the number of times it rebounded that it wasn't close. It was some distance away. But not far enough for her liking. She entered the tunnel and followed the sound, taking three turns before pausing.

She listened for the next roar, before backing up and heading down another tunnel. The roar was desperate, one of anger and annoyance. There was only one person she knew who could drive someone to distraction like that.

"Bryan," Zoe said.

And if Bryan was there, there was a good chance the kids would be with him. She picked up her pace, building to a jog. She slowed when the roars died. She waited to hear another before turning down a different tunnel. She felt along the rough tunnel walls as she went, keeping her eyes ahead.

Before she knew it, the roar was full in her ears, echoing, loud and deafening. She was right on top of it. But where was it?

Then something lurched out of the darkness. And Zoe screamed.

10.

THE MONSTER was hot on Bryan and Aaron’s heels. No matter how fast they ran, how many corners they took, the creature was always right behind them. And they needed to keep changing tunnels, Bryan knew. It was their only advantage against a beast as large as the one chasing them.

Out in the open, the monster would outpace them with ease. But constantly changing direction gave Bryan and Aaron the edge they needed to stay ahead.

That was, until the monster changed tactics.

The creature’s footfalls slowed, becoming faint. Bryan and Aaron slowed in accordance with it, allowing their lungs to refill to their full capacity. But they didn’t stop.

“Do you think it stopped chasing us?” Aaron said.

“It’ll never stop,” Bryan said. “But he might slow down for a while.”

“How does it know which way we’re going?” Aaron said.

“Our shoes,” Bryan said. “It must be able to hear the sound of them bouncing off the walls.”

Bryan slowed to a stop and bent down to pull his shoes off.

“Take off your shoes,” he said.

“What for?” Aaron said. “There are sharp rocks down here. We’ll cut our feet open.”

“Better sharp rocks than the teeth of a monster,” Bryan said.

Aaron wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t argue. He slipped his shoes off and carried them in his hands. Bryan led them down the tunnel, replacing speed with stealth.

The tunnels were deathly dark, silent as the grave. Bryan pulled to a stop. He held out a hand and gently pressed it against Aaron’s chest. He stopped.

There was something strangely familiar about this situation. The deathly silence, so quiet it seemed like the world had its beady eye focused intently on the scene taking place. Bryan stepped back, pressing his back to the wall. He gently pressed Aaron back too.

They waited.

Bryan’s senses were on overdrive. He sensed danger out there in the darkness, but his senses were too weak to give him enough information. He had learned to trust his gut, and waited. What did they have to lose by waiting a little longer?

Bryan’s arm still laid across Aaron’s chest, keeping him back. Bryan forgot it was placed there. Aaron began to lean forward. Bryan pressed back, soft but firm. Aaron grew tense. It took a moment for Bryan to realize why.

Something was in the darkness. And it was moving.

It was hard to say how they knew something was there. There was no light, so there was nothing to see. The tunnel was silent, so there was nothing to hear. It was the smell, Bryan realized. That underused sense in humans. It was the stench of rotting flesh and dried blood from the scorched bodies. That was what their senses had picked up on, their conscious minds slow to realize.

The creature had somehow managed to sneak ahead of them, cutting off their escape route. It had gone into stealth mode and waited for them to present themselves. This was an expert hunter. It was clever, smart, and knew these caves, its domain, like the back of its stunted claw. Furthermore, it had its sharpened skills to hunt.

If Bryan didn’t know better, he would have said the creature was enjoying itself. The majority of its meals were fed to it, coming in the form of dead bodies. Now it had live meals and was able to utilize the weapons and instincts its ancestors had developed over millions of years.

It was close. It was going to get them. If Bryan put out his hand, he was certain he would have felt the scaly skin of its hide.

There was a pair of screams from deep in the cave system. The monster grunted, and then slowly, very slowly, like something that did not want to leave this place, began to withdraw itself. Soon the space returned to normalcy, the creature taking its stench with it.

Bryan and Aaron remained silent, listening to the darkness. Then the monster gave up its stealthy pose, its footfalls once again heavy on the rocky floor.

“That was lucky!” Aaron said. “Now, let’s get out of here!”

“Not so lucky, as it turns out,” Bryan said.

“Why?” Aaron said.

“Those screams,” Bryan said. “Didn’t you recognize whose throats they came from?”

“No,” Aaron said. “Why?”

“It was Cassie and Zoe,” Bryan said.

11.

ZOE RAN as fast as she dared, lifting her knees high to avoid any potential traps and things that might catch her feet. She needed to find the others. She hated being alone. She held out both her hands to feel along the walls. She turned to look behind her as she rounded another corner.

A flash of white, a hard thud to her forehead, and Zoe screamed, on her ass. She hesitated only a moment before getting to her feet and turning around to run in the opposite direction.

“Look where you’re going!” a voice said.

Zoe had to double take to make sure she wasn’t imagining the voice.

“Cassie?” she said.

“The one and only,” Cassie said.

Zoe helped Cassie to her feet. She wrapped her arms around her tight. Cassie was unprepared, and her arms flailed out to either side. Zoe pulled back.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“I’m on a scavenger hunt,” Cassie said. “What do you think I’m doing here? I’m trying to find the way out. As I’m assuming you are too. I’ve got bad news for you if you’re hoping to find the exit that way. There isn’t one.”

“I wasn’t looking for the way out,” Zoe said. “I was looking for you, and the others.”

“Well, they’re not this way,” Cassie said. “I would have seen them.”

Cassie paused, her eyes drifting back down the tunnel she had just emerged from.

“Do you hear anything?” she said.

Zoe listened.

“No,” she said. “Why?”

“Because until a moment ago there were loud footsteps of a monster chasing after me,” Cassie said.

Zoe smiled.

“I made the exact same mistake earlier,” she said. “I thought someone was chasing me, but really it was just my own footsteps echoing behind

me.”

“If those were my footsteps I need a serious diet,” Cassie said.

“Sounds reflecting back at us can take on all kinds of abstractions,” Zoe said.

“Roars too?” Cassie said.

“No,” Zoe said. “I heard them too. That’s what I was working my way towards.”

“Wait,” Cassie said. “You were heading *towards* the big bad monster?”

“It’ll be chasing something,” Zoe said. “Or someone. As I’m here, why wouldn’t it be Bryan, Aaron or you?”

“It was definitely chasing me earlier,” Cassie said. “But it’s gone quiet now.”

“Predators don’t suddenly stop pursuit of their prey,” Zoe said. “Unless they’re resigned to the fact they’ve lost it.”

“Or begin getting close enough to stalk them,” Cassie said.

She turned to look at Zoe. Both their faces had drained of color. They turned to the darkness in either direction. Zoe hadn’t been afraid of the dark since she was a child, but right then all those night terrors filled her heart at the same moment.

There was a soft intake of breath, so soft they both almost missed it. They shared a look. Whatever it was, it was right beside them. They needed to run, and run quick. Staying still wasn’t going to help them. They needed to move.

The intense heat began as a single intense spark, but it quickly ignited, and grew to a voluminous cloud of fire that bellowed and raced toward them.

Zoe and Cassie ran, pumping their legs as hard as they could, entering the darkness without checking where they were going. If they knocked themselves unconscious while running, at least death would be less painful.

12.

BRYAN AND AARON slowed, panting and out of breath. Aaron bent over, then lay on his back, exhausted.

“You should stand up,” Bryan said, tugging on Aaron’s arms. “You need to expand your lungs and use your muscles as a pump to get the blood moving.”

“I can’t,” Aaron said. “Let me lay here. I’m okay.”

“You won’t be,” Bryan said.

Aaron grunted and let Bryan pull him up onto his feet.

“Wait,” Aaron said. “Do you hear that?”

There was a light slapping noise, like a pair of hands clapping. It was getting louder, closer.

“If it’s the monster, just let it come,” Aaron said. “It can eat me. I can’t take another step.”

“It’s not the monster,” Bryan said, squinting at the darkness to make out what it was.

Shapes danced in the dim light. It was difficult for Bryan to make out who—or what—it was. It wasn’t small. And then the figures became clearer suddenly, lit by an intense light that nearly blinded Bryan. He threw up an arm to protect himself. Arms and legs pumped in unison, the figures haggard and drawn.

Bryan’s heart swelled. It was Zoe and Cassie! They were alive! And then he saw the expressions on their faces. They looked pained. And terrified.

“We need to get moving again,” Bryan said.

“I can’t,” Aaron said. “Go on without me.”

“If you don’t run, you’ll be going on without your head,” Bryan said. “Come on!”

Bryan and Aaron ran alongside Zoe and Cassie as they beat a trail down the tunnel. There was a burning smell that accompanied the girls. Bryan pushed it from his mind and focused on placing his feet.

“Why don’t you have your shoes on?” Zoe said.

“To camouflage the noise our feet made,” Bryan said.

“Did it work?” Zoe said.
“Not if we’re running with people still wearing theirs, no,” Bryan said.

13.

“IN HERE!” Bryan said. “Quick!”

The doorway was large, a little too big for Bryan’s liking but there was nothing for it. Everywhere else in this place was only tunnels. This was the first room they had found. They filed inside.

The creature attempted to follow them, burying itself up to the neck in the doorway. It could not squeeze through, its head and body moving side to side to gain every inch it could through the doorway. It had something strapped to its back, what appeared to be some kind of metal armor. It was the family’s saving grace, and kept catching on the doorway.

The monster threw back its head and a stream of fire leapt from its blackened lips, sending out a spray like a flamethrower up at the cavern’s ceiling.

“Woah,” Aaron said.

Bryan glanced at Zoe, and then double took. He slapped at her back.

“What?” Zoe said. “What is it?”

“You’re on fire,” Bryan said.

“The fire must have gotten closer than I thought,” Zoe said. “You don’t think he can get in here, do you?”

Bryan looked the situation over. The monster was jammed in there pretty tight. He was still struggling to get through, straining his gigantic muscles.

“He might,” Bryan said. “But not yet. We have a little time. What happened to you, anyway? We all woke up in the same room.”

“I woke up early, I guess,” Zoe said. “The rest of you were asleep too?”

“Asleep?” Bran said. “It didn’t feel much like sleep to me.”

“I’m not so sure,” Zoe said. “Maybe we were all exhausted and our bodies were recovering themselves.”

“Maybe,” Bryan said. “Some of the things I saw did remind me of dreams, the way they looked and felt.”

The monster pulled itself backward through the door. It glared at the family, at its lost meal. Its footsteps headed away.

“It’s gone,” Zoe said, stepping forward.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Bryan said. “Cool your jets there, partner.”

“Why?” Zoe said. “You heard it leave.”

“I heard it walk away down one tunnel,” Bryan said. “There’s no telling where it really went. It could have looped around, waiting for us.”

Zoe smiled.

“You’re overestimating him,” she said.

“No,” Bryan said. “I’m not. He cut me and Aaron off, knowing ahead of time where we were going to be. A dumb animal doesn’t do that.”

“Bryan’s right, Mom,” Aaron said. “This monster, whatever it is, is smart.”

“Then how do you suggest we get out of there?” Zoe said. “It’s a dead end.”

Bryan turned and appraised their location. It was a large area with two dozen curved shapes sat shrouded with cloth. To the right was a pool of still water. Bryan approached it and peered into its depths.

“It’s an underground pool of water,” Bryan said. “It looks like it goes down a long way.”

Cassie crouched and put her fingers into it. She shivered as she stood up.

“It’s freezing cold,” she said. “I saw a waterfall on the way here. Maybe this is part of that system.”

“Maybe,” Bryan said. “Was it a steep drop?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “We’ll never survive it.”

“Then maybe this might help,” Aaron said.

He stood beside one of the cloaked shapes and had pulled part of its tarpaulin off.

“There are twenty-five of them,” Aaron said. “They look like some kind of transport. They’re on rails.”

“What do you suppose they are?” Bryan said.

“Only one way to find out,” Zoe said.

She moved to the vehicle beside Aaron and tugged the tarpaulin completely off. The cover fell away. Those assembled gave a sharp intake. It wasn’t that it looked so out of place hidden here in the mountains, the shiny metal making warped reflections of the inner cave, but the fact they had all seen this thing before.

“It’s the submersible,” Zoe said.

“The what?” Aaron said.

“The submersible,” Cassie said. “We came across it while you were aboard the Mary Celeste. You saw it too, under the sea when it attacked the Mary Celeste.”

“We spent all that time in the nest at the top of the mountain,” Aaron said. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“I guess it must have slipped my mind,” Cassie said.

“It’s well and truly fastened there now,” Aaron said. “What’s so special about it?”

“Nothing, so far as we know,” Bryan said. “But what is it doing here?”

Zoe moved to the next covered vehicle and pulled the cover off. It was an exact replica of the first. As was the third, and the fourth. They didn’t look at any of the others. They didn’t need to. It was obvious judging by their shape. They were all the same.

“How did they get here?” Zoe said.

“The same way we did, I suppose,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “But… how?”

“Anything I say will be a guess at best,” Bryan said. “Who knows?”

“Someone clearly does,” Zoe said. “Someone in this world.”

ROOOAAARRRR!

The whole cave shook at the monster’s booming bellow. Then there was the rushing thump of heavy feet on the cave floor.

CRUNCH!

The family could make out the powerful hind legs of the creature as it slammed itself and its immense weight into the doorway arch.

“Looks like someone got tired of waiting,” Zoe said.

“Judging by the falling rocks, it doesn’t look like he’ll need to wait much longer,” Bryan said.

Huge great cracks appeared above the doorway like the lines in an old woman’s smile. Rocks were already beginning to fall, shattering on the floor. The monster took a step back and slammed its weight into the wall again, dislodging more rocks.

“We need a way out of here,” Cassie said.

There was nothing they could use inside the room.

“The only way out is through the door,” Aaron said. “Or the pool of water.”

“Veto the door,” Cassie said.

“I second that motion,” Zoe said.

“The water it is then,” Bryan said.

“You’re forgetting we wouldn’t survive five minutes in there,” Zoe said.

“Not by ourselves, no,” Bryan said. “But we could with the latest in submersible technology.”

It took a moment for Bryan’s meaning to crystallize in Zoe’s mind. She turned to the row of submarines. Of course. It was obvious. But then, the best ideas were always simple, and this was about as simple as they came.

14.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

The slamming of the monster's weight against the front wall was the countdown the family didn't need.

They moved behind the first submersible and pushed. It was already loaded onto twin metal tracks and slid easily into the water. The family jumped on board and pressed and pried at the smooth glass surface.

"Any ideas guys?" Bryan said.

They scrambled across the surface to locate the door handle, but couldn't find it.

"Here!" Aaron said.

His hands had located a small recess. He slipped his fingers into it, pressed down, felt a click, and then pulled up to open it. He wasn't strong enough. Bryan grabbed it and heaved.

"We should take one pod each," Cassie said.

"No time," Bryan said. "Everyone get in."

They piled inside, Zoe and the kids wrapping themselves around the back of the driver's seat. Bryan jumped into the seat and pulled the door closed behind him. It clicked, latching into place.

Bryan grabbed the joystick and pressed all the buttons he could see, and flicked all the switches for good measure. A series of lights came on, flashing, but for the life of him, Bryan couldn't locate the on switch.

"Guys?" Bryan said. "A little help?"

The cavern's ceiling was caving in, rocks the size of large dogs raining down, splashing into the water and tossing up white wash. A few smacked the pod's roof, breaking and running down the side.

The monster had jammed itself under the newly widened door, and roared, screeching as it dug in its flanks and forced itself against the overhang. The metal pack on its back cried out as the creature pushed itself further inside. The rocks smacked its snout, making it angry. It thrashed harder.

"There!" Aaron said.

He leaned forward and pressed a button on the terminal. The little machine rumbled into life, a cat's meow compared to the lion's roar behind them. But the monster was working itself free, the cavern disintegrating around it.

"Go, go, go, go, go!" Zoe said, slapping the back of Bryan's chair with her palm.

"I'm trying!" Bryan said. "But the controls are screwy!"

He pushed and pulled at the joystick. It made no logical sense to him. Finally the little pod jolted forward. They were going to collide with the wall ahead.

"Down, down, down!" Zoe said.

"Quit backseat driving!" Bryan said.

He pushed forward on the joystick, and the pod began to lower. Slowly.

Looking back, Zoe saw the gaping mouth of the monster as it widened to bite into the little pod. Zoe turned away, not wanting to look, as if that might prevent it from happening.

The little pod entered the darkness of the water and they sank further.

They were away!

CRUNCH!

The monster's jaws crushed the back of the pod, squeezing it, crushing it like it was nothing but an empty can of pop. But the little pod kept going, pulling against the might of the great beast.

Bryan yelled and turned the handles, full lock, in either direction. The monster's jaws followed, the tendons in its jaws and neck tightening, but a creature's jaws can only go so far before it must stop. They were going to snap if the monster didn't let go soon. Finally, the monster did, though not of its own free will.

The pod bolted forward, as if given a shot of adrenaline having escaped the clutches of the demonic monster.

The creature buried its head back in the pool, but the pod was nowhere to be seen. It tossed its head and emitted a tremendous roar of rank disgust.

Those in the pod didn't hear it, as they moved at a gentle, but serene pace through the water.

"No sweat," Bryan said.

"No sweat for you, maybe," Zoe said. "Plenty for us."

“Do you think one of these days we might go somewhere we don’t need to fight for our lives every second?” Cassie said.

“Where would the fun be in that?” Bryan said.

15.

THE WATER flowed gently and smoothly like a family ride at a theme park.

“This isn’t so bad,” Bryan said.

“Maybe not for you,” Zoe said. “We’re cramped in the back.”

“I’m quite comfortable,” Bryan said, rubbing it in.

“I don’t want to alarm anyone, but-” Aaron said.

“When you say it like that, how can we not be alarmed?” Cassie said.

“I’m wet,” Aaron said. “Water is leaking in somewhere.”

“We’re underwater,” Bryan said. “It’s to be expected.”

“We’re in a waterproof underwater pod,” Zoe said. “It is certainly not to be expected.”

“It won’t matter for long anyway,” Bryan said.

“Why’s that?” Cassie said.

“Because the waterfall is just up ahead,” Bryan said. “Hold on!”

The calmness of the water was disrupted, churned up like white rapids over sharp rocks. It was incredible how fast the water’s temperament changed. The water roared around them, infused with raging bubbles.

“Is it a long drop?” Cassie said.

“Does it make a difference?” Zoe said.

“Not really, I suppose,” Cassie said.

Bryan braced himself on the terminal. The others held onto Bryan’s chair and the handholds around them. It was the best they had. This was going to be painful.

The water evolved into a raging tempest, turning white. The little pod was thrust up onto the surface. They floated there for a moment, getting a good look at the cavern roof about them, and then perched on the edge of the waterfall. It was a long way down.

“It didn’t seem this high from the ground!” Zoe said, pulling back at the sight.

“Nothing we can do about it now!” Bryan said.

The pod floated over the edge like flotsam. Lights on the terminal flashed and a noise wept. It didn’t sound happy. The pod lost all sense of

gravity, like a rollercoaster, but without the health and safety standards. The fall didn't last long, a few seconds at most.

The family took the impact well as there was little space for them to get thrown around. Bryan suffered the worst, his head flying forward and smashing on the joystick. It was covered with rubber, so the impact wouldn't cause too much damage. He hoped.

The small lake was surprisingly deep. The little pod never made contact with its floor. It hissed as it rose to the surface, the water spilling over it, impossible to make out clear distinctive shapes. The monster could have been standing there waiting, wagging its tail for all they knew.

Bryan pushed the pod door open. It rose up on bent hinges. There was no monster. For now.

Bryan drove the little pod toward the water's edge and climbed out. He helped the others out too.

"What do we do with the pod?" Zoe said.

"We leave it here," Bryan said. "Someone will find some use for it someday."

"As an expensive fountain," Aaron said.

"I don't like to litter," Zoe said.

Bryan chuckled.

"I think the authorities will be lenient on us, considering what we've been through," he said.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Zoe said.

"How do we get out of here?" Bryan said.

"This tunnel," Zoe said, walking toward it. "Other than that, I don't remember the way out."

"It's better than where we were," Bryan said. "A lot closer to home."

The family entered the tunnel and were filled with dread, visited by the same emotions they'd experienced when they were last there.

"What do you think it was?" Cassie said. "It looked like a dinosaur to me."

"It breathed fire," Aaron said. "It couldn't have been a dinosaur."

"Of course it wasn't a dragon," Bryan said. "Dragon's don't exist."

"We thought dinosaurs were extinct before we came down here," Zoe said.

"Dinosaurs are extinct from the surface," Bryan said. "The ones we saw were anomalies, that's all."

“And dragons couldn’t have gone extinct on the surface too, and only reside down here?” Zoe said. “The Chinese have believed in dragons for thousands of years. It’s possible they might have known about a real-life monster like this.”

“Dragons breathe fire,” Bryan said. “This monster didn’t.”

“Yes it did,” Cassie said. “Look.”

She turned, grabbed a handful of her hair and showed it to Bryan and Aaron. It was black and singed at the end.

“You think I stopped off at a salon on the way here?” she said.

“I assumed it was escaping gas or something,” Bryan said.

“No,” Zoe said. “It was the dragon. I heard it inhale and breathe out when it blew the flames at us. There is no question it came from the beast. And, if you got a closeup look at its lips, you can see where the flames come out. The monster is not flame retardant. Its lips were melted and scarred from the fires it breathed. God knows how painful it must be.”

“Yes,” Bryan said drily. “Poor thing. I feel sorry for it already.”

“But that sounds to me like a mark against it being a dragon,” Aaron said. “If it was born to breathe fire, shouldn’t it be able to withstand a little heat?”

They came to a fork in the road.

“Should we split up?” Aaron said.

“Not on your life,” Bryan said. “We stick together, no matter what.”

“Wait,” Cassie said. “What’s this?”

She was looking at something on the wall. She put her fingers to it.

“It’s an arrow,” Zoe said. “Do you think it points to the way out?”

“Or to a trap,” Bryan said.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Zoe said. “Besides, I want to get out of here as quickly as I can. This place gives me the creeps.”

“You and me both,” Bryan said.

“Let’s follow it,” Aaron said. “We haven’t got anything to lose. We’re hungry and thirsty and we need to get out of here if we’re to feed ourselves.”

They entered the tunnel the arrow pointed at. It wound around a slight bend before coming to another fork. They searched, and after a little time, discovered the arrow on the opposite wall to where they had found the first one. Clearly they shouldn’t expect the notations to be in the same location at all times.

At each fork in the road, they had to search. Sometimes the signs were covered in overgrown moss, or washed away by rain, or too high or low for them to see clearly. Wherever they were heading, they were getting closer to it.

“What confuses me the most are the machines we found,” Bryan said. “The pods. It’s too much of a coincidence they have nothing to do with the other one we saw in the pirate world, don’t you think?”

The air suddenly smelled fresh and clean. They didn’t realize the tunnels and caves brought a certain mildew scent with them, damp, thick and earthy. They’d been in them for so long they’d grown accustomed to it. It wasn’t altogether unpleasant, but it wasn’t exactly Chanel either. They didn’t need to follow the arrows any longer. They could just follow their noses. The view that welcomed them took their breath away.

The sun was warm on their faces and illuminated rolling green hills with blooming wild flowers. The world was bright and yellow and shiny. In the middle distance to their left was a dense forest. Before them, a huge shimmering lake that fed into the caves to their right. And there was a town, only the church steeple visible over the woodland.

The family filled their lungs. They couldn’t have been happier to be out of the dingy caves.

“Where shall we head?” Cassie said.

“Toward the town I think,” Bryan said. “We can find food and shelter. And they might know a way out of this place.”

“Or we might end up being on the menu,” Zoe said. “We should be careful.”

“If they’ve got churches they should at least have some semblance of technology and development,” Bryan said.

“If we head out now we might get there by nightfall,” Zoe said.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Bryan said.

They stepped into the thigh-high grass and began to traipse through it. Aaron lowered his hands to brush against the soft clumps of seeds at the top of each blade.

GRRRRRRR

The sound was low and barely audible, but it sent a shiver up each family member’s spine, bringing a chill that reached from the bottom of their feet all the way to the top of their heads. They turned in unison to identify the cause of the sound.

A small flock of birds pulled up out of a nosedive and rose high into the sky, flapping to climb at a steeper angle. They seemed to notice something odd about the cave entrance they had been rushing toward.

Standing almost out of sight, with the majority of its body hidden inside a cave, the great beast that had pursued them was now perched, waiting for them to emerge. It had given away its position, perhaps by accident in its preemptive excitement, or on purpose, savoring the chase yet to come. But it hadn't run for them, not yet.

And then its body tensed, its legs coiled, and its head bent down, in line with the creature's long spine.

"Not again!" Aaron said.

He turned and ran before the others reacted. But they were all off the starting block before the great beast was. There was no more time to take in the view, no more time to breathe in the fresh air. They needed to hurry toward the town and hope someone there would take pity on them.

Judging by their latest brushes with world locals, there wasn't much chance of that.

16.

THE FAMILY had unknowingly experienced a series of small lucky breaks. The first was they had already made it around the curve of the lake, and the beast would need to traverse this area too if it was to catch them. It gave the family a small, but not insignificant, head start.

The second impact of emerging on the opposite side of the cave system was the monster hadn't been able to spot them until they were already halfway to the forest.

The final lucky break was the monster being unable to stifle its growl. It would have undoubtedly been in a much stronger position had it not, but there was no way to take it back. It had shown its hand, and now it had to make up for it.

It was certainly making the best attempt it could at doing so. Its legs were long and muscular, and it stretched them to their full length to catch up to the family.

The family tore across the vast expanse, pumping their already exhausted and aching limbs, toward the thick copse of woodland that bordered the town. The monster's crashing footsteps thundered and grew louder, until the earth was shaking and the trees cracked and snapped under its weight as it plowed through them.

"This way!" Bryan shouted.

He turned, taking them at a right angle, out of the range of falling trees that fell like ancient Roman pillars, crashing at their feet. The smashing continued, the pounding of heavy footsteps never ceased, but now it was behind them, sinking away.

The family never stopped, never ceased moving, but Bryan was always aware of the scene they were leaving behind them. Once the crashing stopped, Bryan skidded to a halt.

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop!" he said.

"Why are we stopping?" Cassie said through heaving breaths.

"The monster," Bryan said. "It's stopped."

"So?" Zoe said. "Isn't that a good thing?"

“Not if it’s looking for us, knowing we changed direction,” Bryan said. “If it can hear us, know which direction we’ve come, it might cut us off from the town.”

Zoe peered through the foliage. She could make out a tall wall made of tree trunks. Between the woodland and the wall was a wide clearing. She thought she could spot a moat too, but she wasn’t certain.

“Are you sure?” Zoe said. “It doesn’t look far.”

“It doesn’t need to be far for the monster to get us,” Bryan said.

“Did you see what was on its back?” Aaron said.

“I was too busy running away from its razor sharp jaws, funnily enough,” Cassie said.

“Looked like some kind of metal box,” Aaron said. “It’s weird, don’t you think?”

“So what do we do?” Zoe said.

“We creep through the woodland,” Bryan said. “He might double back to check on where we’ve gone.”

“So we should keep going,” Zoe said.

“Unless he decides to try and cut us off,” Bryan said. “He has a fifty percent chance of choosing the right direction if he does.”

“Then we should continue in this direction,” Cassie said. “Creeping, like Dad said. That way, even if the monster tries to cut us off, he can’t, because he’ll think we couldn’t have come this far. He’ll think he made a mistake and try to go back and check the other direction.”

“He’s not a man,” Aaron said. “We don’t know his intelligence level. He might not think anything at all.”

“We can assume it’s relatively high,” Bryan said. “You can tell by the way he hunts, by the way he’s always ready to surprise us in whatever we decide to do. I think Cassie’s right. That seems like the best course of action to me.”

The family crouched down and crept through the woodland on their forearms. They made a little noise, of snapping foliage and skittering of rodents in the undergrowth, but the monster was far enough away that it wouldn’t have heard them.

But the monster was on the move too.

Its footsteps were softer, quieter, but it was at a disadvantage: its sheer size made it impossible for it to creep, hindered by the woodland as it was.

Birds cawed and broke into the sky, flapping. It gave some indication of where the huge monster was. The family kept going, heading through the undergrowth, and though their legs ached—they were now in a squat position for forty or fifty minutes—they never stopped. The town was visible to their left, always there, tantalizing and close, but yet so far.

They were slow, but silent. They were moving, and that was enough for now. The woodland began to grow thin, and the family were losing their protection.

“We’re going to have to make a break for it,” Bryan said. “For the town. The gates aren’t all that far away. We can get to them before the monster can get to us. Plus, it’s probably still looking for us in the wrong part of the wood.”

“What if the town doesn’t open their gate to us?” Zoe said.

“What if they do?” Bryan said.

He let the opportunity hang before them, tantalizing like golden fruit.

“Our only other choice is breaking out and hoping the monster isn’t looking in our direction while we head toward that other woodland over there,” Bryan said. “If he does, then we’ll be in exactly the same situation there as we are here. But if we’re successful, and he doesn’t see us, then we can camp out there, survive till he leaves, and then make a break for it.”

“But he might camp out here too,” Zoe said. “We’d have no way of knowing. And then we’d have to run even farther to get to the town. I say we go for it now, while he’s still confused and looking for us.”

“Me too,” Cassie said. “I’d rather get it over with.”

“Aaron?” Bryan said.

“Let’s do it,” Aaron said. “I’ll die of exhaustion, but let’s do it.”

“Then we’re really doing this,” Bryan said.

He too thought it was the right decision, but it wasn’t without its risks. They would need to ensure—as best they could, in any case—that the monster was as far from them as possible so they could make the best dash they could.

The family approached the clearing’s edge, on the side closest to the town. But they didn’t step out far. They had no intention of revealing their position any sooner than they had to.

The woodland was silent, as if waiting and watching with bated breath the scene about to unwind before them. There was a wide clearing between

the family and town. They could see figures on the walls. The family waved at them, but the figures apparently couldn't see them, and continued to watch and point at something farther away in the woodland.

It was the monster, Bryan thought. It had to be. Or at least, what the monster was doing to the woodland. They in all likelihood couldn't see the monster yet, hidden by the trees as it was. Which was at least some good news. From this angle it was impossible to see where the monster was. It was clearly still there, its heavy footsteps pounding the earth like a drum.

Bryan tried to think back to how loud the monster's footsteps were when it was chasing them. The whole cave seemed to shake when it chased them before, but they were not in the caves now. It was difficult to gauge how far away the monster really was.

Bryan wished Rosetta was there. She was his right hand man. She knew what he wanted and needed before he himself did. She would have had a computer program on her laptop to input the details so it could tell them precisely how far the monster likely was. But she wasn't there. They were alone with their own supercomputers—their brains. But they had been corrupted by emotions and would likely give faulty readings.

"Remember to keep going," Bryan said. "If you fall over or twist your ankle or get out of breath, it doesn't matter. You can heal later, recover later. But you have to keep going. Okay?"

They all nodded, Zoe and Cassie hopping on the spot and doing some stretches.

"Shall we go?" Zoe said

"Yes," Bryan said.

"Now?" Cassie said.

"Yes," Bryan said. "Now."

17.

THEY PUT themselves in fate’s hands. They prayed the monster was looking in another direction, but from their current vantage point, it was impossible to know.

The family broke from cover, lengthening their strides by extending their arms. Bryan was out front first, but it would be Zoe before long. She was the strongest runner out of the group, followed by Bryan and Cassie—Bryan for no more reason than he was bigger and naturally muscular. But even Cassie would overtake him eventually. Aaron was the slowest. They all knew it, but they wouldn’t slow, not now.

There was a commotion on the top of the town walls, the men moving and cajoling one another. A few turned to run, hopefully to relay messages to open the gates. At this distance they wouldn’t recognize the family, wouldn’t know they weren’t part of the township, that they were strangers from another world. They would be more likely to open the gates in such a situation.

The gates weren’t being opened yet. But there was still time. They could open the gates enough for them to slip through at the last moment. But would they?

They hadn’t been followed yet. The monster hadn’t seen them. They were doing okay.

“Open the gate!” Bryan shouted.

He was sure they couldn’t hear him, but it made him feel better all the same. He waved his arms, signaling for them to pull the doors open. The men on the wall looked at each other. There was shouting. The men were doing something, and Bryan hoped to God it was something in their favor.

They were a good distance from the woodland now, and Bryan was sure they could reach the gates and enter before the monster had a chance of getting to them. They had a head start, in addition to whatever advantage they had managed to get for themselves by creeping through the woodland. Surely it would be enough.

Not necessarily.

The foliage exploded, and a giant sack of meat flew from it. The monster, out in the open, was even larger than Bryan had thought. It had thick scaly skin mottled grey, brown and green in color, seeming to shift and change as it moved beneath the sun. It was rough and craggy, with large flakes of dried skin like paper hanging off it. Its eyes were small soulless black holes, like a shark's, set beneath a thick brow, turning them into dark shadowy pits. They sucked in every ounce of bravery you might have had.

Bryan daren't spend much time looking over his shoulder. It didn't matter what the monster looked like. All that mattered was getting to the door with plenty of time to spare.

Cassie was beginning to pull away from him now. He didn't mind. Let her go first. So long as they all reached the gate before the monster, it didn't matter.

Bryan could even hear Aaron behind him, gasping and wheezing. He was impressed he managed to keep up with him. Or maybe Bryan was just slower than he thought he was.

The monster growled a low groan that bounced off the solid timber walls. It was angry, hungry, desperate to complete whatever horrific process it had begun deep in the caves on its spindle-like torture device.

A ringing bell went up from the church steeple, loud and piercing. The town was being warned the monster was out and coming at the town.

But still the gates had not opened.

"Open the gates!" Zoe shouted.

"Open the door!" Cassie screamed.

Was there a secret password? Something only the town members knew? Was this going to be the end of the family's story here, deep beneath the world?

The monster's footsteps thudded on the earth, gaining ground. Unimpeded, it was far faster than a man could run, and at greater distances to boot.

There was movement in the gate. Not the gate itself, but a doorway Bryan hadn't even noticed was there. It began to open. His heart fluttered with hope.

He pumped his arms harder, his legs finding new strength. All he had to do—all any of them had to do—was get inside the town, through the door, and they would be safe.

Zoe crossed the drawbridge first, passing through the door without stopping. Cassie was next. Bryan risked a glance over his shoulder at Aaron. He was some way behind, a dozen yards, and flailing fast, struggling to keep up.

The monster was gaining, leaning forward with its tail and head fully extended. It was going at full tilt, determined to snap up at least one tasty morsel. The ground shook like an earthquake was striking. If Aaron stumbled and fell, it would be over for him.

Bryan didn't slow, didn't stop. Aaron didn't need the distraction. He needed to focus—so did Bryan. He wasn't safe yet either. Bryan crossed the drawbridge and threw himself through the door, catching hold of its frame and using it to turn himself around so he could slam the door closed the moment Aaron was through.

Then a scream came from the other side of the door.

Bryan's heart stopped. He turned to look through the door, his heart in his mouth. Had the monster caught Aaron?

Aaron slammed into Bryan, knocking him back. He'd just been bellowing, shouting at the top of his voice to get his body to cover the final few yards to the door.

The door slammed into place, followed by all the locks. They weren't enough to keep the monster out, but then, it was unlikely to fit through the doorway in any case.

The family was through. They were safe. For now. Bryan wasn't even aware of the hundreds of staring eyes looking down at him as he ignored his own advice to Aaron and lay on his back, gasping for air.

Right then, he didn't care what the locals were like, what they wanted to do with him. He was safe. His family was safe, and that was all that mattered.

18.

THE LOCALS were silent for the longest time, uttering not a word. They stared at the family, who lay panting on the ground. Zoe could see the questions on their faces as clear as if they were written in ink.

They wanted to know who they were, what they were doing here, and how they had come to be chased by the monster. Zoe was perfectly happy to give them all the answers they wanted, but first she needed to get her breath back.

“Make way!” a deep voice said. “Make way for Lord Maltese!”

The locals parted like the Red Sea. Half a dozen armored men stepped from the crowd and fanned out, filling the wide space the family occupied.

Zoe’s lungs hurt. Was it normal for lungs to hurt? But it was an idle thought, and one she didn’t give much credence.

After the guards had spread out, a family emerged, standing before them. As Zoe recovered and got to her feet, she became aware of how well dressed they were, with the rich colors and hues of only the very finest materials and designs.

The guards did not put much effort into watching the locals. This was an encouraging sign. It told Zoe that if this was the ruling family, then they didn’t really fear for their safety, that the locals seemed to like them, and suggested they were in a relatively safe place.

They were a good looking family. The father, the lord, had a square jaw and mousy brown hair. He was tall, almost as tall as Bryan, and they could have almost looked into one another’s eyes. Lady Maltese was shorter than Zoe, who was herself almost as tall as Bryan. She appeared to be in good shape, though it was difficult to tell beneath the many layers she was wearing.

“You’re new here?” Lord Maltese said.

He said it to Bryan, assuming he was the leader of the family. That assumption made Zoe grit her teeth, but she didn’t say anything. These people were a world away—several, in fact—from the one they occupied on the surface. There was no reason to think they would think like a modern society.

“We are,” Bryan said.

“How did you get here?” Lord Maltese said.

“We came through a sinkhole,” Bryan said. “We’ve been here for maybe the last few hours.”

“Hours?” Lord Maltese said. “My, you are new here. And you stumbled upon the monster in those first few hours? What bad luck.”

“You’re telling me,” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Lord Maltese said with a furrowed brow. “I am.”

“We were unconscious when we got here, and we were going to be fed to the monster,” Bryan said. “Our hands and ankles were tied.”

“Oh dear,” Lord Maltese said, turning pale. “It appears there’s been a case of mistaken identity. You see, we have a ritual here. It helps keep the monster at bay. Ever since our ancestors first arrived here, burnt, scorched bodies have been appearing on the surface of Lake Rebirth. The monster needs to feed. He usually hunted for us and our citizens, and here we had a constant flow of dead bodies coming to us. The decision was made to feed those bodies to the monster, to sate his hunger.”

“We were mistaken for dead bodies?” Zoe said. “But we were clearly not dead, if someone had just checked. And we aren’t scorched.”

“Your hair says differently,” Lady Maltese said with a small smile.

Zoe’s hand unconsciously went to her burnt hair.

“We didn’t look like this when we first arrived,” Zoe said. “The monster did it to us while chasing us through the caves.”

“The dragon chased you?” Lord Maltese said. “And you escaped?”

He had a big beaming smile.

“That’s the first I’ve ever heard of that happening!” he said. “Perhaps the dragon is growing old and weak! Perhaps he is losing his touch!”

“Who was the idiot who took us to the caves in the first place?” Zoe said.

The locals turned to look at a weedy looking fellow in ill-fitting clothes at least two sizes too big for him. He lowered his gaze.

“How was I supposed to know you were all still alive?” Montgomery said. “You should have let it be known you weren’t dead.”

“Our heartbeat ought to have been enough of a clue,” Zoe said.

“Didn’t you check for their pulse?” Lady Maltese said.

Montgomery pressed his dry lips together.

“I don’t rightly recall,” he said.

“Which is another way of say, ‘No’,” Lady Maltese said.

She turned to Zoe and the others.

“We’re awfully sorry for your experience,” she said. “We’ll put safeguards in place to ensure it never happens again.”

“We’ve never seen the dragon act like this before,” Lord Maltese said. “In fact, we’ve never seen him come out from the caves much farther than a few dozen yards. So long as we continue to feed him the bodies that are spat out of hell, he remains calm and quite happy.”

“Hell?” Bryan said. “What makes you think the bodies came from hell?”

“Because of the way they look—scorched and burnt, and they come from underground, where hell is, of course,” Lord Maltese said.

“Of course,” Bryan said.

He didn’t bother to explain where the bodies really came from. Perhaps he would tell them later.

“Would you care to see the dragon from the safety of our walls?” Lord Maltese said.

“See him?” Bryan said. “What do you mean? He’s still here? He didn’t return to the caves?”

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “I rather think he still expects us to hand you over to him.”

19.

THE STAIRS headed up and up and up, into the sky. They had been built for feet smaller even than Aaron's. The steps were narrow, and he had to turn his feet to one side to scale them. Why they had made them like this, Aaron didn't know.

"You don't all have to come up and see the monster," Bryan had said. "I just want to see what it looks like in daylight, without it chasing after us."

"I want to see it too," Zoe said.

Aaron didn't care to see it. In fact, he wouldn't have cared to see it again for the rest of his life. He hated the thing. He would have quite happily used a large gun to kill it. But the last thing he wanted was to appear weak in front of all these people.

The climb up the stairs was the last thing the family wanted after their ordeal. Aaron was not a natural runner, and he had forced his body to do what it was not used to. He was now paying the price for his laziness on the track field back on the surface.

Sport and exercise always seemed like a waste of time to him in the modern world, but now he was down here, fighting and running for his life, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. To stay fit and in shape. He was actually in the best shape of his life right then, which wasn't saying much. He could run a few yards without instantly dying—something he could never have done before—even with the teacher shouting in his ear.

He was panting, trying to keep up with the adults. Lord Maltese walked beside Bryan, and was telling him about the town's current operations. He gave a short history of the town. Aaron couldn't hear what else he said as someone tutted beside him.

"Father always gets the dates mixed up," a sweet voice at Aaron's shoulder said.

The owner of the sweet voice was a short girl, perhaps a year younger than Aaron himself, and had her mother's look. Hers was a classical beauty, with long flowing hair in ringlets. She wore a dress that should

have only really been worn on special occasions. But she wore it well, holding up her skirts so she could more easily climb the stairs.

“The town was founded in 1654, not 1645,” the girl said with a sigh. “No matter how many times I tell him, he always gets it mixed up. I’m Abigail, by the way.”

“Aaron,” he said, shaking her hand. “You’re a student of history?”

“We’re all subjects of history,” Abigail said. “We might as well be students of it as well. It educates and informs us in ways we’re unable to understand till much later I find, which is what my tutor says is the only real knowledge in any case.”

Aaron thought over the words and wasn’t sure he completely agreed with them.

“I don’t agree with him either,” Abigail said, reading his expression. “But it’s better to let the older people have their say, even if it is factually incorrect or useless. His teachings don’t have much of an effect on our world, so who cares?”

Aaron blinked and smiled. He’d found a kindred spirit, deep beneath the earth of all places.

Behind him, struggling up the stairs, Cassie shook her head. At least Aaron was making friends. It was usually always her who made friends easily, but she supposed that was just because she was more suited to making friends up on the surface than he was.

Cassie’s legs ached more than she could recall them ever hurting. They were shaking before she even got halfway up the steps. She reached for the handrail, but her palm was sweaty, and she slipped.

She fell backward. She could see what was going to happen already. She was going to fall and hit the stairs and slide back down a good number of them, rolling backward as she did so. She was going to suffer some serious damage and likely broken bones.

She regretted going up those stairs. She knew she should have waited at the bottom. And now she was going to pay for it, potentially with her life. She had escaped pirates, giant birds, dinosaurs, and a dragon. Now she was going to be vanquished by some steps.

But, it didn’t happen.

A strong hand reached out and grabbed her by the arm. Another swooped up around the small of her back.

“Careful,” a deep voice said. “The handrail can be a little slippery at times.”

Cassie turned to her rescuer. It was a handsome face with a strong jaw and smooth cheeks. He had big blue eyes and long blond hair. He was a prince from the fairytale books.

Cassie averted her eyes. It didn’t seem right to look at something so beautiful without being at least a little bashful. She felt ashamed she looked so rough in his presence. That was the second reason she looked away: if she didn’t have to look directly at him, she didn’t have to pretend like she was there. She wasn’t there if he couldn’t see her.

“There’s nobody in town who knows more about the town’s history than my sister,” the young man said. “I sometimes think she was swapped at birth for a smarter child from someone else’s family.”

“I sometimes feel the same way about myself,” Cassie said. “Not that I’m not smart. I mean, I didn’t always fit in with my parents.”

“I suppose none of us ever really do,” the young man said. “I’m Roland.”

“Cassie,” she said, smiling bashfully.

“How about we get up these steps and look the dragon dead in the eye?” Roland said.

Suddenly Cassie couldn’t think of anything she’d rather do.

20.

“EVERY WORLD we come to, we seem to find somewhere going through a period of transition,” Zoe said, climbing the final few steps.

“In what way?” Lady Maltese said.

“In the first world there was a war between two peoples, an ancient ancestor of the human race, and a more modern one,” Zoe said. “In the second world, a war between the British and the pirates—don’t ask. The third world was being destroyed by its human inhabitants, something we understand only all too well on the surface. And now we’re here.”

“There is a transition taking place,” Lady Maltese said. “Though perhaps not on the scale you’re used to seeing. But we are changing. We are lucky enough to have a genius inventor here in this town. He’s developing technology that will completely change the way we live our lives. He’s working on making horseless carriages and ways to float safely from great heights and… all manner of exciting things.”

“Really?” Zoe said. “That’s amazing. I guess in a place as small as this, it only takes one person to make a big difference.”

“Yes,” Lady Maltese said. “Thankfully, for the better. What is the level of technology like on the surface?”

“Advanced,” Zoe said.

“You already have horseless carriages?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes, for a long time now,” Zoe said.

“Has it changed the way your world operates?” Lady Maltese said.

“Oh yes, totally,” Zoe said. “Though not always for the better.”

Lady Maltese frowned.

“Perhaps you or your husband might educate us, so we might not make the same mistakes you and your ancestors did,” she said.

“We can try,” Zoe said. “But people have a way of ignoring good advice.”

“Then we will do our utmost to ensure we will listen,” Lady Maltese said with a fresh smile. “Will you help us?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “I don’t see why not. But we’ll need your help too. There’s a way for us to escape, to leave this world and return to our

home.”

“Certainly,” Lady Maltese said. “All you need do is describe it to us.”

They were interrupted by Lord Maltese.

“Here we are,” he said.

He was standing on top of the wall. He held out his hand to help his lady wife up the final few steps. There were soldiers standing to attention with weapons, armed and ready should the monster attack.

The family approached the wall and peered over, keeping back in case they needed to leap back to safety. They didn’t have to look long to see the giant reptile standing, almost at head height with the wall.

From here they could see the rolling grassy dune fields. They were farmed, in the midst of a new crop rotation. There was something somehow modern and organized about it. But then, they would have been doing this for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years, and they would be experts. Still, it was a higher level of sophistication than they had seen so far in the other worlds.

Flames smoldered from the monster’s blistered lips. It did not blast them with its torrent of fire, and let its eyes do the glaring for it. The soldiers clutched their spears and bow and arrows tight. Their arms shook with fear, but they did not release, primarily because they knew it would anger the beast and force it to attack them.

Judging by the look on their faces, they did not appear to have seen the beast with their own eyes before. That struck Zoe as strange. She filed the thought away for further analysis later.

“When did the dragon first appear here?” Zoe said.

“Fifteen year ago,” Lord Maltese said. “One day he wasn’t here, and then suddenly he was.”

“Why haven’t you killed it?” Bryan said.

“Have you seen it?” Lord Maltese said. “It is large and very strong. We do not have the resources or manpower to destroy something so great. If we were to attack, it would be the end of us. But thankfully, we have an inventor, a slightly eccentric figure who is developing weapons we hope will aid us in destroying the dragon. Then we can live in peace.”

Zoe looked over the side of the wall at the monster. It appeared to be looking directly at her, as if he were all it was concerned with in the whole world. It wanted her, and her family, to consume them as it had the

scorched bodies. As far as it was concerned, the family belonged to it. And it wanted them. Now.

Zoe felt a shiver go through her. How long would the town protect them if the monster attacked? Would they let their own people die before sacrificing a family they had no connection with? Zoe didn’t think so.

“Come,” Lord Maltese said. “You must be tired and hungry. You will stay with us at the castle.”

He didn’t wait for their response, and turned and began heading back down the stairs at a spritely pace. He seemed completely unaware of the look of dread on the family’s face, peering down at the near-endless stretch of stairs.

21.

THE ROOM Bryan and Zoe were given was a study in the classic medieval design. Expensive heavy drapes and fresh tapestries adorned the stone walls. The bed was huge, big enough for a whole family to sleep in.

Zoe pressed her hand to it to check the firmness. It was soft as a cloud. It didn't matter what it was like, in truth. After sleeping on the ground and various floors the past few weeks, any kind of cushion was welcome.

The door banged open, and a gaggle of women entered carrying heavy jugs of steaming water. They poured them into the large bath in the middle of the room, and piled various soaps and perfumes on one side. They quickly backed out of the room to leave Bryan and Zoe in peace.

"Thank you!" Zoe said.

The door was already closed.

"The service is good," Bryan said.

"If not their manners," Zoe said.

She opened the door and peered down the corridor in either direction. Suits of armor stood to attention, coats of allegiance from noble houses decorating the walls. Cassie and Aaron were in a room adjacent to their own. Zoe ducked back into their room.

"Wait a minute," Zoe said. "I wonder if…"

She got down on her knees and looked under the their bed. She smiled and reached for what she could see there. She pulled it out. It sounded ceramic.

Zoe lifted it up with a grin on her face. It was a strangely shaped object, with a lid on the top that slotted nicely into place.

"What is it?" Bryan said.

"A chamber pot," Zoe said. "Here. This one's yours."

Bryan took it, though he didn't want to. It felt like an alien object in his hands.

"A chamber pot?" he said.

"You-" Zoe said.

"Yes, yes," Bryan said. "I know what it's used for. Where's yours?"

"Under the other side of the bed, I suppose," Zoe said.

“Do you think they’re matching?” Bryan said.

Zoe smiled contentedly and looked around at their room. It wasn’t altogether different to a high class hotel they might find on the surface. Indeed, there were probably hotels and resorts that offered this style of room. She felt happy, and at the same time, exhausted and tired.

“Do you want to take the first bath, or shall I?” Zoe said.

“You can,” Bryan said. “I’m probably dirtier than you. Better for me to wash in your dirty water than vice versa.”

“So kind and considerate,” Zoe said, kissing him on the cheek.

“Besides, the water’s steaming hot,” Bryan said. “It’ll be just right for you. Just make sure to get out when it’s a little warm.”

“I think being around lords and ladies is having a positive impact on you,” Zoe said.

“Do you want me to turn my back?” Bryan said.

“Why?” Zoe said .”You’ve seen everything before.”

“Haven’t I just,” Bryan said with a cheeky wink.

“You can keep an eye on the door,” Zoe said.

“I’ll jam something under it to keep it closed,” Bryan said. “That way, I can enjoy the view.”

“Pervert,” Zoe said.

“Guilty as charged,” Bryan said.

Zoe stripped off and climbed into the hot water. She lay down and let the water soak into her bones. She let out a deep contented sigh.

“I want to stay here forever,” Zoe said.

“I want to stay looking at you forever,” Bryan said.

Zoe smiled, feeling a little self conscious, but didn’t cover herself up.

“Do you want me to scrub your back?” Bryan said.

“In a minute,” Zoe said. “Let me enjoy this for a little while.”

Bryan stood up and wandered around the room. He picked up a little rock that had been polished to a high shine. It looked expensive. He moved to the tapestries on the wall.

One depicted a town that was happy and vibrant, with trade going in and out. In the next picture, a hole appeared underneath it, and the whole town disappeared into it. The town was destroyed, the inhabitants still alive, now living in a dome-shaped world. The locals rebuilt the town, and they once again prospered. And then a monster appeared. It was big with sharp pointy teeth. It came each night, taking one, two, sometimes three people

at a time. Sometimes they were able to fight it off, but most of the time they failed. So they fed it dead bodies that washed up on the lake, and the town was once again at peace.

Bryan wondered what the next few images would look like. He suspected it would be of a dead dragon and a heroic figure standing over it —perhaps even Lord Maltese.

Zoe began to scrub at her skin, working hard to remove the dirt, grime and sand. She had to wash her hair three times before it began to feel like real hair.

“Okay,” Zoe said. “I’m ready to be scrubbed.”

Bryan scrubbed her back with a natural loofah.

“Careful!” Zoe said. “I’d still like to keep some of the skin if you can manage it.”

“I can’t help it,” Bryan said. “The dirt is really caked on here.”

“Just… try to take it easy,” Zoe said.

Zoe’s skin was red raw by the time Bryan was finished, but it was clean and felt like new. He dreaded to think what his own back was going to look like after he’d finished washing.

“I’m done,” Zoe said. “But the water’s cold and filthy. I’ll ring and get more hot water brought up.”

“Ring?” Bryan said.

Zoe climbed out of the bath, water spilling over the floor. She wrapped a thick towel around herself and crossed to a series of bells that hung above the door. They each had something written underneath them. Zoe studied them before pulling on the string attached to one of them.

“It’ll be up here in a minute,” Zoe said.

Ten minutes in the place, and Zoe could have been born there. Bryan supposed it was due to her classical history education. She was living in history now. It was like traveling back in time, only without the discomfort of wondering whether you’d be able to return to your own timeline. The world still existed and carried on perfectly well without them. They just needed to get back to it.

Zoe’s mouth dropped open at the color of her bath water.

“That was from me?” she said. “I’m surprised I was able to walk under all that extra weight.”

“You have lost a lot of weight,” Bryan said. “I guess the mud only made up the difference.”

Zoe pressed her lips together. It was a gesture Bryan loved, and he felt himself begin to stir. He stood up. Zoe would have recognized the look in his eye anywhere.

“Oh no,” Zoe said. “You stay away from me, you filthy beast. Get clean. Then we’ll see.”

“See?” Bryan said. “I want to do a lot more than see…”

The door burst open, and the mother hens came into the room carrying jugs of steaming water. They reached down and pulled a plug from under the bath, spilling the water into a tray on wheels. The dirty water spilled into it.

The women dragged the tray out into the hall and replaced it with another, clean one. They washed the inside of the dirty tub and wiped it down so it was as good as new. Then they tipped the hot water into it. They worked with the efficiency of an F1 pit team.

“Is there anything else, my lady?” one of the women said.

“Lady?” Zoe said. “Uh, no. Thank you.”

The mother hen followed the other women out into the hall and shut the door behind them.

Bryan and Zoe stood there a moment, stock still, minds still processing what had just happened.

“Did you just see a team of old ladies come in and replace a bathtub full of water in ten seconds flat?” Bryan said.

“I did,” Zoe said.

Bryan approached the tub, surprised to find it perfectly clean.

“They replaced the soap!” he said. “I didn’t even see them bring any new soap in here!”

“They’re efficient,” Zoe said.

“I’ll say,” Bryan said. “I’ve never seen such efficiency on the surface. Even in the best hotels in the world. No, *especially* not in the so-called best hotels.”

“You stay at those hotels for the prestige, not the service,” Zoe said.

“Don’t remind me,” Bryan said. “In some ways the world has gone backwards. We’ve advanced in technology and sophistication, but sometimes I think we paid too high a price.”

“I think you’re right,” Zoe said. “Sometimes we care more about the things we own more than the people who make them for us.”

Zoe opened a wardrobe. Dresses and smart male wear circa the 1700s hung from hangers.

“This stuff is in our size,” Zoe said. “How do you suppose they knew our sizes?”

“Beats me,” Bryan said, stripping off. “Maybe we match the average size of the 1700s person.”

“Maybe,” Zoe said with a frown.

She flicked through the items one at a time until she came to a long burgundy dress. She unhooked it and draped it over one arm. She felt the material between her fingers. It was smooth and silky. She laid it on the bed and admired it. It was a beautiful item. If she’d lost the amount of weight she thought she had, it would fit her just right.

Bryan eased himself into the water, his face scrunched up. It was too hot, so he stood up and put more cold water into the bath. The steam bellowed and turned his area of the room into a sauna. He sighed as he lowered himself back into the tub.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Zoe said.

“Wonderful,” Bryan said.

He lay back and relaxed, closing his eyes. He didn’t relax as long as Zoe had, but then, she didn’t expect him to. Bryan was a man of action. Yoga for him was about the stretches. He had no time for the spiritual mumbo jumbo.

“I’ve been thinking,” Bryan said.

“Here comes trouble,” Zoe said.

“It seems like we’ve been passing through time as we move through these worlds, don’t you think?” Bryan said. “It’s like seeing the development of man, how we emerged and looked out at the world and finally managed to get control of our surroundings.”

“You might be onto something there,” Zoe said.

Relieved he didn’t sound stupid, Bryan pushed on.

“First there were the cavemen, the early humans,” he said. “And then there were the seafaring people, and then the miners. And then these people. They look more advanced than anyone else we’ve come across so far.”

“But still a long way off the surface,” Zoe said.

“Maybe these sinkholes only open for a short period of time before closing,” Bryan said. “And then new ones open up, each time getting

closer and closer to the surface time."

"So you're saying we're getting closer to home?" Zoe said.

"I don't know," Bryan said. "But it makes sense in a warped kind of way."

"It does," Zoe said. "But just because we're moving forward in time doesn't mean we're necessarily getting closer to the surface."

"No," Bryan said, slightly deflated. "I suppose not."

"I haven't noticed anything about the rocks and the walls of the worlds we've been to that suggests we've been moving up nor down," Zoe said.

"Thanks," Bryan said. "That really makes me feel better."

"It's not about feeling better," Zoe said. "It's about the facts. When we get back to the surface, everything we know about deep under the Earth's surface is going to change. All the textbooks will need to be rewritten. Nations will begin digging to discover these new worlds, and these new resources."

"Yeah," Bryan said.

And suddenly he didn't sound so excited by the prospect.

"But not necessarily," Zoe said.

"What do you mean?" Bryan said. "How will we explain to everyone where we've been if we don't tell them about these worlds down here?"

"There are a million different reasons we can use to explain where we've been," Zoe said.

"You mean, lie?" Bryan said. "What would we say?"

"Anything," Zoe said with a shrug. "No one would know. Anyway, we don't need to worry about that right now. We need to focus on getting to the position where we'll use those stories we'll make up."

Zoe moved to the makeup table and began experimenting with the items she found there.

"I suppose you're right," Bryan said. "I vote we were on an undercover mission for the CIA."

"Something believable," Zoe said.

"I always fancied myself in the CIA," Bryan said.

He picked up a scrubbing brush and began rubbing at his skin. He had to dunk the sponge under the surface with every couple of scrubs. Then he paused.

"Why would anyone want to protect the machines?" he said.

"Sorry?" Zoe said.

“The machines in the cave,” Bryan said. “They’ve been playing on my mind. Why would someone want to put them there?”

“I don’t know,” Zoe said. “Maybe they weren’t being hidden there at all, but protected.”

“Protected by what?” Bryan said.

“By the most vicious guard dog in history,” Zoe said. “A dragon.”

Bryan stopped scrubbing himself and turned to look at Zoe.

“You don’t honestly think that’s what’s happening there, do you?” he said. “That someone is using that monster to protect something?”

“Why not?” Zoe said. “No one here will go anywhere near the caves. It’s where I’d put something if I wanted to make sure no one ever discovered it.”

Bryan returned to scrubbing himself.

“You wouldn’t be able to discover it either though, would you?” he said. “It’s all very well putting it in there in the first place, but how would you go about getting it back out again?”

“You’d have a secret entrance, I suppose,” Zoe said.

“I didn’t see any secret entrance,” Bryan said.

“That would defeat the point of it being secret now, wouldn’t it?” Zoe said.

“I suppose so,” Bryan said.

Bryan peeled something sticky off his arm. It had dried and looked like a flake of skin.

“But why would you want the machines here anyway?” Zoe said. “There’s not much water. Where would you use them?”

“Maybe they’re only here for a while,” Bryan said, scrubbing the soles of his feet. “You’d move them on to their final destination later.”

“But why keep them here?” Zoe said.

“Beats me,” Bryan said. “Maybe there isn’t a safer place between here and wherever they’re going.”

“That’s certainly true of the last world,” Zoe said. “God help whoever is there right now.”

“God help us,” Bryan said. “Never mind anyone else. We’ve got a dragon to face.”

“It’s not a dragon,” Zoe said. “There aren’t such things as dragons.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But there are such things that could be mistaken for a dragon. Like things we’ve already seen.”

Zoe’s hand froze in the middle of applying makeup to her lips.

“Like a dinosaur?” she said. “Funny. The same thing crossed my mind too. If you took away the monster’s ability to breathe fire, you could easily mistake it for a T-Rex. But how could one of those have gotten here?”

“Who knows how things work here,” Bryan said. “One might have gotten stuck here by accident, or discovered a tunnel and ended up here.”

“Seems a bit unlikely, don’t you think?” Zoe said. “If our idea of the worlds moving forward has any credence to it, it means there were dragons around during the seventeenth century.”

“There are plenty of stories about them,” Bryan said. “George and the last dragon for example.”

“Hardly concrete evidence,” Zoe said.

“You never know how much truth might be contained in old stories,” Bryan said.

“I’ll believe them if we found bones in the fossil record around that time,” Zoe said.

“Your scientific snobbishness is shining through,” Bryan said.

“It’s called evidence and intelligence,” Zoe said. “I don’t believe things just because it sounds nice. But I guess this whole place is unlikely. Why should the creatures here be any different?”

“What about the fire we saw it breathe?” Bryan said. “Where did that come from?”

“You saw it outside the town walls in pure daylight,” Zoe said. “It had some kind of machinery attached to it, something big and heavy strapped to its back. It looked half robot to me. Who knows what its purpose is. But these locals are living in the middle ages. They wouldn’t know the difference between modern science and magic. But we do. It was a machine, and someone put it on a dinosaur.”

“Someone, who?” Bryan said.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Zoe said.

They shared a look.

“This is getting spooky,” Bryan said.

Zoe didn’t like to admit it, but this whole world had her spooked ever since they had arrived.

22.

THE DINING HALL was a feast for the senses. A string quartet played harmonious music, soft soothing melodies. The table was mahogany, polished to a high shine. Expensive chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, giving the room a healthy glow. The food looked like something from an Ideal Homes catalogue.

Zoe couldn't think of a time when the family had looked so good either. None of them had taken a nap after their recent ordeal. It seemed their period of being unconscious had fully restored them. Besides, the fright they experienced of a monster chasing them was becoming a regular part of their lives. Like anything that became routine, it had less of an effect on them the more they experienced it.

The sun's rays were still visible through the windows. The lighting wasn't necessary yet. Clearly the night's events were expected to carry on late into the evening, long after the sun had set.

But the family had to earn their meal. The hall was crammed with townspeople. They stood between the family and the dining table at the front of the hall. The family had to shake them each by the hand and introduce themselves. It was good they all spoke English, though you could hardly guess it, what with their strong accents.

It was difficult to understand some of them. It was somewhat overwhelming for the family, especially Zoe and Aaron, who were not often at such high class events. Bryan, for his sins, was more experienced. Cassie carried herself with the dignity of her father. They mingled and answered questions to anything posed to them.

The first round consisted of the affluent townspeople, the nobles. They were apparently enchanted with the family, and found their broad American accents a novelty. *Strange*, Cassie thought. *Usually it's the other way round.*

At the head of the main hall were the lord and lady. They oversaw the event with mild interest, but didn't get involved in the proceedings. Abigail and Roland appeared to be bored by the event, staring off into space and blowing out through their mouths.

Abigail had something of interest in her lap, cleverly concealed within the folds of her dress. Roland had not prepared himself, and so spent most of his time eying up the local girls, most notably, perhaps because she was something new to look at, Cassie.

She looked different to the other girls. She had a feistiness, an aggressiveness in her character that came through in her persona. She was a firecracker, something that would keep Roland on his toes. He found her alluring, exciting. Something different to the normally coy and shy ladies in court.

He was pleased when Cassie occasionally glanced in his direction, her eyes catching his, before looking away. It excited him to see that. It wasn't that she was shy about looking him in the eye—far from it, clearly—but she did not want to be seen as a girl who did look a boy in the eye, despite what her true character might be.

But it wasn't just the rich and high blood present in the great hall. The whole town had turned out for the event. The roiling masses, unused to such ceremonies, stayed predominantly at the back of the hall. They looked apprehensive as the family approached, shuffling their feet and not liking to ask too many questions.

The more boisterous youth had no such reservations, and asked questions, though they were not always the most searching or introspective —mostly things about how they dress on the surface, or what the women were like. The family gave direct, but not particularly informative, answers. The rowdy young men soon got bored and moved away.

The family were starving by the time they got to their seats at the head table, on either side of the lord's family. The family felt self conscious with the arrangement. They were not used to being the center of attention. They concentrated on eating quietly. That seemed to please the lord and lady both.

There was one member of the main table who was not part of the two families. He had a scruffy beard and didn't speak often. When he did, it was in a low mumble that caused the listener to have to lean forward to hear what he was saying. He almost always ended up repeating what he was saying for this reason, the first words on his conversation partner's lips being, 'Excuse me?' It was hard to believe that so much of the town's future rested upon his narrow shoulders. He was the inventor. His name was Jeffrey.

He was inventing things only the family from the surface could begin to understand the purpose of. It was hard to imagine this little man hard at work in his workshop, knocking these things together. He didn't seem all there to Bryan, his marbles scattered across the floor of his mind.

A minstrel took to the stage and began to sing.

There was a man,
A very strange enchanted man,
His cowl was black, his face pale as snow,
And he walked with a limp and had a glow,
He promised us jewels as far as the eye could see,
Instead he gave us nothing, and all he took from me,
A promise he made, to us all,
And he transformed into the beast we all hate and adore.

There was more, but it was lost to conversation at the head table.

"We've found suitable accommodation in the town for you all to reside in," Lord Maltese said to the family. "It's a cute little cottage on the outskirts of town. It was previously occupied by the good inventor here, but we've since relocated him to the castle. He's able to focus on his inventions without interruption. Your house is close to the market and water well. It is fully equipped, though you might find you'll have to buy a few things if required. Feel free to charge them to the castle.

"My lady wife mentioned you are from the surface and have some experience of engineering. It would perhaps serve you, and us, if you were to aid our inventor with his various contraptions."

"Sure," Bryan said.

The lord spoke with a booming voice that reached the back of the hall, so even the poor could hear their conversation. This was a show, one Bryan and his family needed to take part in.

"That will be fine until we find our way out of here," Bryan said.

"Out?" Lord Maltese said. "But there is no way out."

"There is always a way out," Bryan said. "It's just a matter of finding it."

"We have spent centuries looking for a way out and never found one," Lord Maltese said. "I can assure you, if there was a way out, we would have found it by now."

"We've been in several worlds so far," Bryan said. "In each one we were able to find the Passage. I'm confident that with enough time, we will find

one here too."

Silence, save for the etchings of knives and forks on plates. Lady Maltese placed a hand on the lord's arm. His shoulders visibly relaxed. He smiled at his wife, who nodded back to him, before resuming eating.

"Of course," Lord Maltese said. "We will make every effort to find this Passage of yours."

"Thank you," Bryan said. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"It's no trouble," Lord Maltese said. "I got word this afternoon the dragon has returned to his cave. I doubt we'll be seeing much of him any longer."

"That's all very well," a voice from the back of the hall said, "but what about…?"

His voice was lost to distance.

"Excuse me?" Lord Maltese said. "Who spoke?"

Silence answered him.

"Don't be afraid," Lord Maltese said. "That's what this feast is for—for everyone to voice their concerns, ask questions and get helpful feedback. You will not be punished for expressing yourselves."

A man far down at the opposite end of the hall stood up. A thousand pairs of eyes turned to him. He removed his hat, but he did not quail.

The lord squinted in an effort to identify the speaker.

"Jones?" he said. "Is that you?"

"It is, my lord," Jones said.

"Jones is one of our finest cobblers," Lord Maltese said as an aside to the family. "He fixes shoes to the very highest standard. Without him, we would all be walking barefoot. Speak up, Mr. Jones. Everyone here wishes to hear what you have to say, no one moreso than I."

"That's very gracious of you, my lord," Mr. Jones said. "We all greatly respect you and your lady wife, of course. And we are all excited about the new developments we've got coming our way thanks to the inventor. But it seems this family arrived at a peculiar time."

"How do you mean?" Lord Maltese said.

"Well, it's the fact that with all these developments happening, it's about time something came along and threw a spanner in the works," Mr. Jones said.

"I can assure you, the family's arrival has nothing to do with the developments we're making," Lord Maltese said. "In fact, with their

unique knowledge of the technology from the surface, we could well expect development speed to increase, not slow down. Does that answer your concerns, Mr. Jones?”

Mr. Jones nodded and performed a slight bow.

“It does, my lord,” he said.

“Excellent,” Lord Maltese said. “Please sit down, Mr. Jones. You must be hungry. Does anyone else have a concern they’d like to voice?”

There was a pause, and then a young woman in her thirties stood up. She was closer to the top of the hall so it was easier for the lord to identify her.

“Cynthia Morris,” Lord Maltese said. “What issue do you have?”

“I’m concerned about the dragon,” Cynthia said, her voice clear and easy to hear.

“We’re all concerned with the dragon,” Lady Maltese said. “We have been living with it for years, but with any luck, with the inventor’s help, we might finally overcome it.”

“That’s not my meaning, m’lord,” Cynthia said. “It’s the effect these people have had on it that troubles me. You see, it’s true the monster used to come out of its lair every so often to feed on the innocent of the town, but that stopped when we started feeding it them bodies that come up out of Lake Rebirth. And the dragon didn’t come nowhere near us after that. Why would it? It don’t need to eat us no more.

“And then this family arrives, and the dragon comes out of its cave, chasing them, and they bring it right here. To our doorstep. Begging your pardon my lord, but why are we letting them stay here when it’s them the dragon wants? Why are we risking our lives, and the lives of our children, when it has nothing to do with us, none of our affair?”

“Yeah!” a few of the locals said, clapping.

It was a perfectly reasonable thing to be concerned about, Bryan thought.

The lord opened his mouth to speak, but this time Lady Maltese rose to her feet.

“Who among you here would not demand entry if you and your family were running for your lives?” she said. “If we lack the courage to protect each other, including the lives of strangers, well that’s too much of a sacrifice to make. It would mean our very humanity would be forsaken and there would be nothing more for us to do but turn up our toes and say

we've had enough, and we're no longer men and women. Then we can crawl back into the swamp where we belong and let the good lord take us, for we will no longer be human.

"You say you respect my husband and I. I ask for you to extend that respect to our guests, as well as to one another. We are one and the same, all here trying to do the best for ourselves and our families."

She retook her seat. The applause was slow in coming, but once it started, it caught like a spark to a clutch of dry grass, and soon the whole room was alive with cheering and whistling. Even Cynthia clapped at the impassioned and well-argued riposte.

"Well spoken my dear," Lord Maltese said with a half smile at his wife, who nodded back respectfully. "As I've always said, if anyone thinks he—or she—could do a better job than me as lord, then he—or she—need only step forward and say so.

"They will be given all my powers and duties. They will be allowed to assume my role immediately. The opportunity shall always be available to you all. Please let that person stand and present themselves."

No one moved.

"We all perform our duties here," Lord Maltese said. "No one job is more or less important than another. Each needs to be carried out, and carried out to the best of his—or her—ability. Anyone can try any job he so wishes, so long as he can find someone to take his place. Are there anymore issues people would like to share?"

23.

BRYAN AND ZOE entered their room and shut the door behind them.

“Well,” Zoe said. “That was an unexpected evening.”

“Nothing like being blamed for the monster attacking the town to know you feel wanted,” Bryan said.

“It did all feel a bit strange, didn’t it?” Zoe said.

“A bit?” Bryan said. “I thought for a minute they were going to lynch us! What do you think the average IQ among these folks is? Ten?”

“They haven’t been exposed to the same kind of education we have,” Zoe said.

“You can say that again,” Bryan said. “How did we ever manage to develop past this? Believing in angels and demons and hocus pocus. I’m surprised we managed to develop anything as advanced as a toothbrush with this much mistrust and superstition.”

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?” Zoe said. “But without them, we would never have become who we are today.”

“I always thought that if we were to bring these people to the surface they would eventually get used to it,” Bryan said. “That they could assume normal, regular lives. But you know what? I don’t think they could. I think they’d end up turning into psychopaths.”

“It would take them twenty years to learn how everything worked,” Zoe said. “And what kind of work would they do? Land work, labor. But their children could make the transition. We essentially all have the same hardware.”

“Doesn’t always seem that way though, does it?” Bryan said.

“But it’s true,” Zoe said. “We’re essentially the same. There’s no reason why their children couldn’t become a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or businessman on the surface.”

“So long as they leave all this nonsense behind,” Bryan said, shaking his head. “The human mind is capable of many incredible things, and yet it’s also capable of so much stupidity.”

“That’s the way we’re made, I’m afraid,” Zoe said. “We’re still that ape swinging from the trees scratching out a living and trying to survive.”

“Looking at these people, I can believe it,” Bryan said. “I’m not sure if anyone here could survive on the surface.”

“I’m not sure,” Zoe said. “The lord might be able to, though he’d find it difficult adapting to modern living, what with shopping at the local supermarket or going to work in a dead end office job.”

“Lady Maltese might be okay,” Bryan said. “But for the same reasons as the lord, she might find it difficult. The workers would probably find it easier to adapt, funnily enough. They would be used to the daily slog, used to going to work for a living.”

“What about the inventor?” Zoe said. “Could he survive?”

“He’d find it the most easy of all, once he got used to everything on the surface,” Bryan said. “Creative minds are always in demand. And if he could come up with a novel solution to a particular problem we have, or a product everyone would want, he’d be set for life. And he works from inside a room. The inside of a room looks the same anywhere.”

“You certainly are angry today,” Zoe said.

“Not angry,” Bryan said. “Just disappointed. With all our gifts, we’re still at the bottom of the doldrums, scraping out our survival. That’s all we’re doing, all we’re ever likely to do. Struggle.”

Struggle. The keyword to everything the family had been through since they arrived in this place. Zoe was sure there was going to be a bit more struggle before they returned to the surface—*if* they could return.

24.

THE FAMILY slept like the dead. They fell asleep the moment they pulled the covers over themselves. Nothing could wake them, which was just as well, because nothing did.

They slept through what remained of the night, all morning, and then into early afternoon. By the time they awoke, the sun was high in the sky and the birds were singing.

They got up, washed and dressed. Cassie and Aaron were knocking at Bryan and Zoe's door before they were completely ready to receive them. Bryan opened the door and let them in. Aaron fell on the bed, Cassie into a box chair.

"What are we going to do today?" Cassie said.

"The same thing we do in every world we come to," Zoe said. "We're going to go looking for the Passage out of here."

"It's not so bad here, is it?" Cassie said, tracing her finger around the edge of a coffee table. "Compared to the other places we've been, I mean."

"No," Zoe said. "I suppose not. Why do you say that?"

"Because if we couldn't find the Passage in this world, it wouldn't be the end of the world," Cassie said. "Living here wouldn't be so bad. Who knows what the next world might be like. I mean, look at the last one."

Zoe paused in brushing her hair.

"We're going to get out of here, Cassie," she said. "We're going to find the Passage and we're going home."

"But we might not find our way out of here," Aaron said. "Dad didn't, so why should we?"

Zoe turned back to the mirror and combed the same spot of her head for five minutes. She still looked distracted, a million miles away.

"Father was killed down here," Aaron said. "You've seen how many dangers there are. And we've got each other. Dad would have been alone. And he wasn't in the past two worlds, so far as we can tell. So there's no reason to suspect he got much farther than the pirate world."

Zoe nodded, but she clearly didn't believe that. Her former husband had been an explorer, an adventurer. He wouldn't have let a little life

threatening danger get in his way. But Aaron was right they hadn't heard word of him in the past two worlds. But then, those worlds were huge. Just as there was no reason to think he had gotten through them, there was no reason to think he hadn't gotten out somehow.

But the question remained: if Aaron's father had managed to get out, why hadn't he come to find Aaron and Zoe on the surface? He would have. That was the problem with the idea of him getting out.

"At least you know your father was once here, or in these worlds," Cassie said. "My mother just disappeared one day, never to be seen again."

"None of this helps us find the Passage out of here," Bryan said. "Come on. Up on your feet. If I know our hosts, I'd say we have a very nice breakfast ready and waiting for us."

The family left the room and headed downstairs to the main hall. They were greeted by friendly staff, who looked like they'd been waiting for a rather long time. They snapped to attention from their bored lounging positions when the family presented themselves.

The staff showed the family to their seats at the head table. The tables from the feast of the previous night had all been cleared away. The floors had been scrubbed clean. Clearly it wasn't just the baths that were well maintained. Lady Maltese ran a tight ship.

"I'm sorry we're late," Bryan said. "We were more tired than we thought."

Their server, a tall thin morose looking man, only smiled and gestured to their seats.

"It is of no concern," he said. "Breakfast is served whenever you are ready, sir."

He looked up, and plates of food were brought over and deposited in the middle of the table. There was meat from the feast, cold cuts that looked just as delicious as they had the previous night. There was mead and ale to drink, but none of the family touched it.

"Do you have any hot drinks?" Zoe said.

"Mulled wine, perhaps?" the server said.

"Coffee, or tea perhaps?" Zoe said.

"Certainly," the server said. "We have both. Would you prefer to have them after your meal?"

"Customary?" Zoe said. "No, we'll have them now, if that's okay."

“Of course,” the server said, though he looked a little confused. “What would you like?”

The whole family wanted coffee. The server headed away to whisper in someone’s ear. Within twenty minutes their coffee was brought to them. It was clearly freshly made, the aroma strong.

While they waited, the family tucked into the food. There were eggs and ham and bread—some of the best bread Zoe had had in years. It was fresh, still warm. Either they made their own here—most likely—or it had been brought over from a bakery in town. They all ate heartily and well. There was little left on their plates by the time they were done.

“Would you care for cakes and pastries?” the server said.

Bryan put a hand to his stomach.

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” he said.

“I’ll take some,” Cassie said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learnt during this whole experience it’s that you should never turn away food if it’s offered.”

“I’ll take some too,” Zoe said.

Everyone filled their pockets with lemon cakes before they set off outside. They were met by a man holding the reins to a fine specimen of a horse. It was black and sleek, its hair shining. A man was bent over, checking the horse’s shoes. When he straightened up, Bryan realized it was the lord.

“Ah,” Lord Maltese said. “I see you’re up.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Apologies. We overslept.”

“No matter,” Lord Maltese said. “Yesterday was clearly a tough day for you.”

“Extremely,” Bryan said. “But we’re watered and fed now and ready for action.”

“Glad to hear it,” Lord Maltese said.

He turned to the stableman holding his horse’s reins.

“Bring the others around,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ll begin our search for the Passage.”

The stablemaster left with the horse and returned ten minutes later with a stable boy and three more horses.

“I thought we could split up,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ll cover more ground that way.”

“Any sign of the monster?” Bryan said.

He still couldn’t bring himself to call it a dragon.

“None,” Lord Maltese said. “I have men stationed to inform us of the dragon’s appearance, should he come from his cave again. On horseback, that should give us more than enough time to return to town.”

“Excellent,” Bryan said.

“I’d like for the kids to stay inside the town walls for now,” Zoe said. “Just until we know it’s safe outside.”

“Certainly,” Lord Maltese said. “There are many places to search within town. My son and daughter will escort your children. My wife and I shall escort you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Zoe said. “But you don’t need to put yourselves to any trouble for our benefit.”

“It’s no trouble,” Lady Maltese said, descending down the steps. “It’s been awhile since I was outside the town walls in any case. It’ll be good to get some fresh air.”

“You be careful,” Lord Maltese said, putting a hand to his wife’s cheek.

Lady Maltese closed her eyes and pressed her hand to his, looking back into his eyes. It was an intimate moment, at odds with the social situation. The others felt mildly embarrassed at the public display of affection. The staff appeared to feel the same, and turned to look away, waiting until it had passed. Abigail and Roland paused as they descended the steps and curled up their faces, disgusted as all kids were.

The lord planted a small kiss on Lady Maltese’s lips. They stayed like that for several seconds before the lord pulled away. Lady Maltese had a look on her face like someone in total bliss. Once they parted, they smiled at one another for a little while before turning away and mounting their horses.

Zoe supposed that was what real love was, or at least the Hollywood version of it. But she knew there were many different types of love, as many as there were people. Some were overt in their affections, others less so. But it was still the same love, an intense tightening in the chest that swelled and made the partners look crazy.

Bryan turned to Zoe.

“If you’re expecting the same from me…” he said.

Zoe grinned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she said.

It was too soppy for her liking. She liked romance, but this to her was shameless showing off. They were kind hosts, and that was all that really mattered.

Bryan climbed onto his horse. He wasn't a bad rider, but he lacked the effortlessness of the lord and lady. Zoe was a better rider than him too. He had no idea.

Bryan turned to the kids, who were still on foot.

"Will you kids be all right?" he said.

Cassie turned to look at her host—the young and incredibly handsome young lord Roland.

"I'll be fine," she said.

Bryan pursed his lips.

"Make sure that you are," he said.

"I'll be fine too," Aaron said, beaming a smile at the young lady Abigail.

The two were off, heading in the same direction together with a small retinue of guards at their heels. They were talking and laughing before they even turned a corner and disappeared. It was so easy for some people to get along with others. Easier the younger you were, Bryan supposed. He waved to Zoe as he was led one way, Zoe in another.

The lord took Bryan, flanked on either side by half a dozen armored guards, through the castle's main entrance and out into the street.

"I thought we would begin today with the farms," Lord Maltese said. "There's a lot of land there, and the farmers will show us every inch of their farmland. How big are these Passages you spoke of?"

"Usually quite large," Bryan said. "About the size of a doorway, but they can vary in shape and size and color. We found one that was a quicksand pit, another that was a whirlpool."

The lord looked at Bryan askance. Clearly he had no idea what those things were. It was strange, but to be expected, Bryan thought. Each world would only know about those things that directly affected them and their own worlds. If an alien came down to Earth and tried to describe some hitherto unknown object, Bryan was certain he would have reacted the same way.

"I must apologize for the peasants last night," Lord Maltese said. "I try my best to educate them, but there is only so much a mind dependent on superstition and religion can take in. It's hard for them to realize the

importance of science and development, of the beauty and significance of rational explanations."

"You don't need to apologize," Bryan said. "We have plenty of people like your peasants on the surface. Forgive me for saying this, but you don't speak like them. Like the other townspeople."

"That's because I'm not one," Lord Maltese said. "Not any longer, in any case."

"You don't think like them either," Bryan said.

"That's thanks to my wonderful wife," Lord Maltese said. "She reads a lot, and opened my eyes to the world of literature and philosophy. She's a remarkable woman, my wife."

"How did you meet?" Bryan said.

"She is a lady of one of the most respected families in Silene," Lord Maltese said with more than a hint of pride. "It's amazing the heights one can climb if they but have the determination and resources. I feel sorry for the former lords who didn't have a good wife waiting for him at home.

"My lady is my guiding star, my rock. I can understand why men stray, women too. Or why they drink or gamble, or partake in a million other distractions. They needed support, an anchor, at home. But they didn't have it. I'm not condoning what they did, but I do understand it."

The road opened up as they approached the main gate—the entrance the family had passed through the day before. The guards on duty saluted the lord as his retinue passed. The land beyond the town was not flat, but rolled over voluptuous dunes, the landscape breathtaking and beautiful.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Lord Maltese said.

"Sure," Bryan said.

"Aaron, he doesn't have your look about him," Lord Maltese said. "And Zoe doesn't seem the type to play around…"

"You're asking if he's mine?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Lord Maltese said. "Sorry. That sounds very rude, doesn't it? Cassie has your look. She could even pass for Zoe's child too. I don't know."

"No," Bryan said. "Aaron isn't mine. Not biologically. Maybe he will be mine one day. He's from Zoe's previous marriage. Cassie is from my own prior relationship."

"I see," Lord Maltese said. "And you have come together to make one new family?"

“We’re trying to,” Bryan said. “But the kids have been putting up some resistance to it.”

“It must be difficult,” Lord Maltese said. “Are such couplings common on the surface?”

“Fairly common,” Bryan said.

The lord nodded.

“It will be the same here too in years to come, I suspect,” he said. “Women already demand divorces from their husbands, because their husbands do not treat them with the respect they deserve.”

“The world is always full of change,” Bryan said.

“Much of this town was brought down here with us when we first came down here,” Lord Maltese said. “We’ve added to it over the years, but the original town is very much in evidence.”

“It must have been a large sinkhole to bring the whole town down here,” Zoe said.

“Huge,” Lord Maltese said. “Our ancestors believed we were being swallowed by the Earth, that we were dead and gone. No doubt there were tales of our disappearance, of a town disappearing from the surface.”

“Probably,” Bryan said.

“You don’t know?” Lord Maltese said with a frown. “I would have thought it would have been commonplace.”

“No,” Bryan said. “But then, I don’t live in the old country.”

“The old country?” Lord Maltese said. “Britain is no longer the leader of the world?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bryan said. “America is the leader of the world now. It has been for the past hundred years or so.”

“America?” Lord Maltese said, frown deepening. “But it’s hardly any age.”

“It developed very quickly,” Bryan said. “At first borrowing from the old world, and then forging its own way.”

“I see there’s a great deal of change on the surface,” Lord Maltese said.

“There is less change down here in comparison simply because the population isn’t as large,” Bryan said. “There will be fewer instigators and motivators, fewer people to force change. It’s actually a small number of people who contribute to developing the world and making it a better place to live in.”

“What about the rest?” Lord Maltese said. “They’re mindless drones?”

“No,” Bryan said. “They provide services we need every day. Most people do. There are very few innovators in the world. They might make the world a better place to live in, but the rest of us make the world a place worth living in in the first place. Everyone is important. We all play a vital role wherever we are.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Lord Maltese said.

Bryan was beginning to like this lord. Perhaps with a little help from Bryan and his engineering background, he might make a real change to this world. A change, finally, for the better.

25.

“I THOUGHT we could take a trip out to the mill today,” Lady Maltese said. “As you plan on searching everywhere, you might as well begin there.”

“Has the mill been there long?” Zoe said.

“As long as the town has been,” Lady Maltese said. “We’ve had to repair and rebuild it more times than we care to count. It requires uninterrupted wind, and the walls around our town are too high. The dragon seems to like using the mill as a chew toy. But we need our flour, so we keep on rebuilding it. That’s one of the things our inventor is working on, a kind of security device that will keep the dragon away if he gets too close.”

“He’s an extraordinary man,” Zoe said.

“The finest man,” Lady Maltese said. “There’s nothing he can’t come up with when he puts his mind to it.”

“A man like him doesn’t come along often,” Zoe said. “You should make sure to utilize him as much as possible—without wearing him out, of course. He could make a real difference here.”

“He already has made a difference,” Lady Maltese said. “He’s increased food production by thirty percent, and we’re looking at making even more next year. He’s also come up with a water filtration system, which will cut down on the number of illnesses the townspeople catch. And those are just two of his inventions. Every week he comes up with more.”

“Has he always been able to come up with inventions like that?” Zoe said.

“He has, but he’s producing them at a more prodigious rate now,” Lady Maltese said.

“Is there a reason for that?” Zoe said.

“He said he just woke up one day and could do these amazing things,” Lady Maltese said. “I don’t understand half of what he talks about, but whatever he touches, turns to gold.”

The mill was a large construction, its giant sails moving in lazy circles in the breeze. It was a gorgeous sight. Zoe dismounted from her horse and

could smell the gritty flour being ground up. All thought of the Passage went out the window, disappearing with that smell.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Lady Maltese said. “It’s one of my all-time favorite places.”

They entered through a short door that Zoe had to duck her head down to fit through. A large woman with flabby chins greeted them.

“Hello,” she said with an unpractised bow. “My ladies. I’ve been expecting you. Where would you like to start?”

“Where would you suggest?” Zoe said.

They were taken on a tour of the building, starting from the bottom, and then working their way to the top. The large woman was very hospitable, giving Zoe items to taste test, and really knew her profession. Zoe could see there were no secret doors, no hidden passageways. No way the Passage was there.

They moved to the top of the building, where there was a narrow balcony for them to take in the view. The mill’s sails creaked as they moved round, the arms making rustling noises like a ship’s cracking sails in a strong wind.

Zoe breathed in the fresh air—cleaner, she thought, than any she had ever experienced. Cassie was right. This was the best world for them to live in that they had come across so far. If they couldn’t find the Passage, would it be such a bad thing? They could aid the inventor and make a real difference here.

Lady Maltese pulled on a woolly hat. It was of a simple design, red like wine. Zoe shivered, suddenly aware of the stiffness of the breeze.

“That’s nice,” Zoe said, nodding to Lady Maltese’s hat. “Did you make it?”

“I did,” Lady Maltese said, beaming happily.

“My great aunt used to do a lot of knitting,” Zoe said. “She would make things and then sell them to make a little extra money.”

“She must have been good, for others to pay for them,” Lady Maltese said. “I doubt anyone would want to buy mine.”

Zoe peered closer at the garment and frowned.

“That’s remarkable,” she said.

“What is?” Lady Maltese said.

“Your knitting ability,” Zoe said. “You haven’t dropped one stitch.”

“I’m sure there are some,” Lady Maltese said.

“No,” Zoe said. “I can spot them a mile away. It’s perfect. You must have taken a very long time to make it, to have to keep going back and fixing the dropped stitches.”

“I am very slow,” Lady Maltese said with a grin.

“My great aunt was good,” Zoe said. “She always complained when she dropped a stitch and it was too far back to do anything about it. She always showed me where she’d done it. She never could figure out why it happened, why then of all places. Often she had been running on autopilot, hadn’t been interrupted, her mind taken off what she was doing. But there it was, the dropped stitch.

“She would still send it to her customers anyway, of course. They wouldn’t ever notice it. But my great aunt always did. Despite all her years of knitting she never made a garment that didn’t have a dropped stitch, she said.

“But now that I look at yours, I can see that you don’t have any dropped stitches. You must be something of a perfectionist! Or a prodigy. Remarkable. You would have expected at least one.”

“It comes with practice,” Lady Maltese said. “And I’m sure there are many mistakes if you look close enough. We all have our skills, do we not?”

Lady Maltese was looking off into the distance, toward the town. She seemed preoccupied by something.

“I was thinking about Jeffrey, the inventor,” Zoe said. “I’m interested in how he comes up with such ingenious ideas.”

“It’s in his blood,” Lady Maltese said. “His father was an inventor, and his father, and so on, right back through the ages. But every so often, once in every great while really, there comes along a man—or woman—with a unique ability. He could be the joiner of men, or born with the skill to invest, turning five galleons from a single one in no time. Every so often there is a leap forward in ability, in strength, in creativity. And that is the inventor.

“Jeffrey’s ancestors were all unusual. Some were insane, pushing the limits of what we might consider normal behavior, others were equally deranged, but of a helpful bent. The good they did greatly outweighed the bad their relations performed. They served their terms and did good work, each slightly pushing the envelope forward in our society. But Jeffrey is entirely unique.”

“Can I see his workshop?” Zoe said.

“His workshop?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “The place he develops his inventions. To see how he works. I won’t understand most of what he does, but as your husband said, we might be working with the inventor until we leave. Probably best to introduce ourselves and show him we’re not complete idiots.”

“Yes, of course,” Lady Maltese said. “I’m glad you have an interest in such things. I myself have no such skill. It’s hard for me to understand how a woman could be interested in science.”

“There are many women scientists and engineers on the surface,” Zoe said.

“Extraordinary,” Lady Maltese said.

“The advancement of three hundred years of society,” Zoe said.

“It’s breathtaking,” Lady Maltese said. “But is it always for the best, do you think?”

“No,” Zoe said. “Certainly not. But in many cases, yes.”

A distracted smile alighted Lady Maltese’s face. Then she turned to look back out in the direction of the town.

“I hope we will also make such advances,” she said. “Without leaving anyone behind.”

It sounded like a pipedream to Zoe. Advances for some invariably resulted in decline for others. It was a nice dream to have, so long as the dreamer knew that was what it was: a dream.

26.

THE ORCHARD was large, signs of it beginning long before they reached the farm. Fruit trees grew in the streets leading up to the farm on all sides.

It was one of the few farms located within the town walls, Roland told Cassie. When she asked him why, he asked her to give herself the answer.

Cassie shrugged.

“Think,” Roland said. “You’re smart enough to figure it out.”

Cassie took a moment before shrugging her shoulders again.

“Are you always this shy around guys?” Roland said.

Cassie glanced at him, and then looked away. She blushed. No, she was never shy like this with boys. She wasn’t a hussy, she had simply always gotten along better with boys than girls. The relationships were easier, simpler. If there was ever sexual tension and she sensed they might have been interested in her, she was quick to cut it short to avoid any problems.

If Cassie herself began to get the familiar stirrings of interest in one of the boys, she always took the time to get to know him first. Then she approached him, making it clear she liked him. It was best to be obvious, she’d found. Boys were oblivious to subtlety, except when they were making their own clumsy attempts.

“Maybe you’re used to feigning lack of intelligence with boys, but you don’t need to do that with me,” Roland said. “I like smart women. I guess it rubbed off on me from my mother. My tutor says we all eventually want what we were brought up with.”

Cassie’s face curled like she’d just bitten into a sour apple. It might have been true, but that didn’t make her want to think about it. She turned her mind to the reason for the farm within the protective walls.

“I guess you’d need it just in case of attack,” Cassie said.

A smile played across Roland’s lips.

“And why would that be useful?” he said.

“Because when you’re under attack, one of the most important resources you have, one that might mean the difference between success and failure, is the need to feed your people,” Cassie said.

She glanced at him again, and then looked away. She didn’t want to look stupid in front of him.

“That’s right,” Roland said. “You have a good head on your shoulders. We need a large stock of food in case we’re attacked by the dragon and can’t get out. It’s unlikely to happen now, of course, what with sacrificing the dead bodies to the dragon. It’s a hangover from the past when such attacks were common place. Now let me ask you another question…”

“Do we have to do this?” Cassie said. “I hate being tested.”

“This isn’t a test,” Roland said. “This is a question.”

“What’s the difference?” Cassie said. “When you already know the answer to the question, it’s a test. Isn’t that the difference between an innocent question and an exam? The fact those asking the questions already know what the answer is?”

Roland cocked his head to one side.

“Not necessarily,” he said with a smile. “It might be a question to validate what we *think* we know.”

He smiled a lot, and Cassie found it very distracting. Roland had one of the most beautiful smiles she had ever seen. It glowed, lighting up an entire room. It told you not to worry, that he would always be there to help you if you needed it. He would be a great lord.

They had reached the orchard’s front gates. Roland turned to their armed guards.

“Please wait here,” he said.

The guards nodded, bowed their heads, and stood outside the farm with hands resting on their sword hilts.

“You don’t need your security?” Cassie said.

“In town?” Roland said. “Almost certainly not. The people love my father. They wouldn’t want to harm him or his offspring. They want things to continue as they are.”

“Then why have them at all?” Cassie said. “You must admit, it sends a confusing message.”

“It does,” Roland conceded. “But we are English, and we love few things more than tradition. It might be outmoded, outdated, and unfashionable, but it is the way we have always done things. If we continue to do the things we’ve always done, there’s no reason we can’t continue to survive. And that’s tradition. Change is seen as dangerous. But have no fear. If someone does set upon us, we wouldn’t need my armed guards in any case. I’m exceptionally good with a sword.”

Cassie looked at the hilt of Roland’s sword sticking out of its scabbard.

“It’s encrusted with jewels,” Cassie said.

“Your powers of observation astound me,” Roland said.

Cassie glared at him.

“My point is, it is a show sword, meant to be gawped at by locals, not to be used,” she said.

Roland pulled his blade from its scabbard and laid the point across the back of his forearm.

“Is that real enough for you?” he said.

“Yes,” Cassie said. “But it doesn’t prove anything about your skill to use it.”

Roland blinked, startled. He replaced the blade and smiled at Cassie with his arms folded.

“You’re quite something, aren’t you?” he said.

Cassie wasn’t sure whether to take that as a compliment or not.

“It’s a good thing,” Roland said. “Most of the women here are…”

“Boring,” Cassie said.

“Consistent,” Roland said. “They’re cut from the same cloth and there’s little exciting about them. Nothing that sucks me in or makes me want to get to know them. Whereas you…”

He circled Cassie.

“You’re quite different,” he said. “Unlike any girls I’ve seen or likely to see here. Would you care for an apple?”

“Excuse me?” Cassie said.

The sudden change in topic had taken her by surprise.

“An apple,” Roland said, pointing at the glowing balls of red hanging suspended from the trees around them.

“Oh,” Cassie said. “Yes. Please.”

Roland reached up, went onto his tiptoes, and pulled a pair of apples free. Workers were inspecting the produce and picking the ripe specimens. They placed them in baskets almost overflowing with juicy fruit.

A strong wind whispered through the trees and made the leaves rattle. Some of the leaves snapped off and floated like confetti at the closing of a wedding ceremony, twisting and fluttering to the ground. The apple trees were arranged in long, seemingly unending, rows.

Cassie bit into her apple. It was bright red, juicy, and just about the most delicious fruit she had ever tasted. It was just the right mix of crunch and juiciness. She consumed the rest of the apple with hungry bites.

“Do you like it here?” Cassie said.

“It’s fine,” Roland said. “It’s relatively safe and there aren’t a lot of problems.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would be happy in a small world like this,” Cassie said. “I could imagine you as a go-getter in a big city.”

“You think?” Roland said. “When you’re raised in a world such as this, the only one you’ve ever known, you don’t really think about it.”

“No, I suppose not,” Cassie said. “Which is why you should be allowed to try out the two and make your decision.”

“And you think being a go-getter in a city is better than a lord in a small town?” Roland said.

“I don’t think it’s better,” Cassie said. “Just different.”

“You were at the feast last night,” Roland said. “You heard my father offer his position to anyone who wishes to take it. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” Cassie said. “Has anyone ever accepted the challenge?”

“Yes, once,” Roland said. “The lord willingly gave up his power, and the challenger took it up.”

“What happened?” Cassie said.

“What do you think happened?” Roland said.

“Is this another test?” Cassie said with a frown.

Roland smiled.

“Sorry,” he said. “But how else do you think my father became lord?”

It took a moment for the comment to penetrate Cassie’s consciousness.

“Sorry?” she said. “What do you mean?”

“My father wasn’t born the lord,” Roland said. “And my mother wasn’t born to be the lord’s wife either.”

Cassie’s frown deepened.

“I’m sorry, you’ve lost me,” she said. “I thought that was how titles passed from one generation to another? By birth.”

“I guess it is the most logical thing to assume,” Roland said.

“How did that even happen?” Cassie said.

“It’s remarkable the things you can achieve if you put your mind to it,” Roland said.

“You’re telling me your father, the lord, was never born into his current position?” Cassie said.

She still couldn’t wrap her head around the information.

“That’s what I’m telling you,” Roland said. “Remarkable isn’t it? The opportunity was there, ready for anyone to come along and take. And then when someone finally did, my father did something remarkable, something no one, except my mother, believed he could do. It was him who came up with the idea to feed the dead bodies to the dragon. Everything he did was successful. It was like he was blessed and whatever he touched turned to gold.”

“The old lord must have been bummed,” Cassie said. “I would have regretted having that clause, letting someone else come along and take away all my power like that.”

“No, not really,” Roland said. “He’s a cobbler now. He’s much happier. Everyone says so. If he wasn’t, my father would find something in the castle for him to do.”

“Whoever came up with the idea for someone else to take over clearly never thought someone would actually step up to the plate,” Cassie said. “Otherwise they wouldn’t have created it.”

“And no one would have,” Roland said. “Until things went terribly wrong. The system was put in place to hold those in charge accountable, knowing that if they did a bad job someone else could easily take his position. The person taking up lordship only had humiliation to deal with. They had little else to lose, save face.”

“Why didn’t more people want to be lord?” Cassie said. “I know if I lived here a long time, I might want to try.”

“Because most don’t have the education to lead people,” Roland said. “People know this. People said my father was stupid for trying to be lord, that he would only end up shaming himself and my mother. But she supported him. Anyone can do it, it just takes time to learn how, just as it does with any job, but this time there are much fewer opportunities for failure, a sharp learning curve.

“If it wasn’t for both my mother and father there would still be people running around scared. It was because the dragon appeared and started terrorizing people fifteen years ago that my father decided someone needed to do something.

“It was from then that we managed to really begin to advance and develop, able to build the wall that could protect us. Of all the lords we’ve had, my father has had the most effect on the improvement of the people and their lives. I’m really proud of him.”

“Your father never considered removing the clause?” Cassie said. “To cement his power and stop anyone from doing what he did to the last lord?”

Roland looked like he had never considered the idea before.

“No,” he said. “He likes having it there. It keeps him on his toes. I like it too. I wouldn’t want the position if there was no chance of me being overthrown.”

“What did your father do before all this?” Cassie said.

“He was a stablehand,” Roland said. “He worked at my mother’s noble house before they got married. Then the dragon attacked, and the rest is history.”

“But they seem so…” Cassie said, searching for the right word.

“Cultured?” Roland said. “It’s an act. A practised act. One they’re exceptionally good at. They wouldn’t have been taken seriously by the nobles if they didn’t sound and look the part, and so that was one of the first things they did—make themselves look the part.”

Cassie began to realize just how special and unique the lord’s family was. They were not only the most powerful family in the town, but they were also the most forward-thinking. If the town was to change for the better, it was going to need them to lead.

27.

THE STAIRS wound around the inside of the cylindrical wall in a spiral. Before undergoing their adventure Zoe would have found it a difficult slog. Despite all the hours of running she'd put in on the surface, it was nothing compared to the workout she got down under the surface every day.

The stairs ended at a thick wooden door. Lady Maltese put her shoulder to it and pushed, but it was too heavy for her. Zoe joined her and pushed. They had left the guards at the bottom of the tower. At the time Zoe had liked the idea of being alone with the lady, but now she was beginning to regret that decision.

The workshop was located in the highest tower of the castle. It did not look like much on the outside, but on the inside it was full to bursting with worktables packed with tools and equipment.

It was a mess, as all the cleverest and more creative people were prone to be. Zoe supposed human creativity was the same wherever you went. A human mind preoccupied with thoughts was always less likely to be concerned with trivialities like tidiness.

"Originally Jeffrey's workshop was located on the other side of town," Lady Maltese said, "but my husband wanted to keep an eye on any new developments. So we relocated him here, where he could work in peace, with all the food and drink he might require, and all the silence he could ever need. We keep him very comfortable."

"So I can see," Zoe said. "A mind like his needs to be protected and well fed."

Buried amongst it all, sprawled in a moth eaten armchair, were the empty bottles of a drunk. Sitting amidst it was the creative genius drunk himself, Jeffrey. He was fast asleep, drooling, a thick mucus growing on his flat chest and grey-white beard.

A wire bird cage hung in one corner, and when Zoe approached it it became clear it wasn't as empty as she'd first thought. Flies buzzed around it, a pile of shapeless feathers in the bottom. So much for a pet to keep you

company. Zoe wondered how long it had been dead. Not that it mattered. Dead was dead.

“Should we wake him?” Zoe said.

“The bird?” Lady Maltese said. “I think it’s a bit late for that, don’t you?”

Zoe looked at the lady, who grinned.

“Sh,” Lady Maltese said, pressing her finger to her lips. “Let him awaken naturally. It’s how he comes up with his best ideas.”

Great. What were they meant to do in the meantime? Zoe had wanted to see the workroom and inventor at work, and now here she was. Jeffrey was hard at work. Drooling. Snoring.

Zoe decided she would take her time and poke around. As she moved around the room she realized that, despite the mess, there was nothing that would have looked all that out of place in the modern world. To be sure, there were items that looked like early prototypes of modern instruments, but their shape and materials were not all that different.

There was a makeshift TV, but the glass was too thick and wouldn’t have produced much in the way of a picture. But the theory was there, and the pieces of electronics to make it to boot. How someone from this time could have dreamed up something so sophisticated was beyond understanding for Zoe.

Newton was a genius of pure mind, unprecedented in his day, matched only by Einstein. These two men went into their own private rooms to figure out the laws of the universe and, incredibly, managed to come up with something so profound, so incredibly simple, logical and yet beautiful, that it could only be correct.

Jeffrey perhaps wasn’t able to solve the riddles of the universe, but had the remarkable ability to glimpse the future, or rather the present, on the surface. He could then develop his own systems of how they might work in this day and age.

Looking around, Zoe could see some of his inventions were rough, childlike interpretations of what he’d seen in his mind. Early stepping stones in the rapid evolution of man.

Zoe began to wonder about their moral code for helping these people. Was it right to give them a hand up? To help them to develop these forms of technology? She supposed it wasn’t like they would be helping them create dangerous weapons, or ways to split the atom. But wasn’t all

technology inevitably pointing in that direction anyway? If so, giving them any help whatsoever was dangerous. Zoe wasn't sure. She would need to speak to Bryan about it before they made any decisions.

Jeffrey grumbled under his breath. Then his eyes shot open. Lady Maltese approached him slowly and handed him a piece of paper and a pen. The inventor took it, not blinking, dipped the pen in the ink and began to draw on the parchment, slowly at first, and then gradually building into a frenzy, working faster and faster.

"What's he doing?" Zoe said, sidling up to Lady Maltese.

"Drawing his dreams," Lady Maltese said. "Inspiration has struck."

They waited for him while he completed his drawings, and didn't approach him again until he had finished. He put the pen down and lay back in his armchair.

Lady Maltese picked up the old man's sketch and extended it to Zoe so she could see. To her it looked like a bunch of scribblings and black shapes. She was disappointed.

"What is it?" Zoe said.

"I don't know," Lady Maltese said. "No one does, save him. Later, he will come to it and begin outlining whatever it was he originally saw in his dreams. Only once he has completed it will we begin to understand what it is he has drawn. Even then, with his description to us, we might not understand. Such is the mind of a genius. It works at its own speed and doesn't feel the need to slow down to cater for us."

Zoe looked again at the image. This time her mind came up with a dozen modern inventions it might have been. She looked at Jeffrey, who was already falling back to sleep. He really was a force of nature.

It wasn't for another fifteen minutes that the inventor decided to wake fully. He stumbled into the bathroom and washed his face, coughing up something Zoe didn't like to imagine. It could have been a lung by the sounds he was making.

A little refreshed, Jeffrey returned to his workroom. He started when he saw the two ladies standing there. He clearly hadn't noticed them earlier.

"Good morning," Jeffrey said.

"Evening," Lady Maltese said.

Jeffrey peered at the sky out the window.

"So it is," he said.

"How are you able to come up with such things?" Zoe said.

“I go to sleep and when I wake up, poof! It’s there!” Jeffrey said.

“That’s remarkable,” Zoe said. “We need more people like you on the surface to come up with solutions to our problems.”

“I get dizzy, feel a headache coming on, and I know then it’s time for me to lie down and let nature take its course,” Jeffrey said. “When I wake up, my hands are covered in oil or grease, or whatever it is I used during the night, and the finished item is on the table. The only difficulty then is trying to figure out what it is the damn thing does. I’ve near blown my ear off experimenting with these things.”

“Incredible,” Zoe said.

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” Jeffrey said with a grumble.

“No, I meant about your process,” Zoe said. “I know there are creative people on the surface who have ideas while they sleep and then use those ideas once they wake, but to do what you do… It’s like sleepwalking, but sleep inventing. It’s an amazing gift.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not always amazing,” Jeffrey said. “I get the worst headaches, usually when I wake up after a hard night of inventing. It doesn’t happen every night, only when inspiration strikes, I suppose.”

“We thought it best to keep him in isolation while he’s coming up with his designs,” Lady Maltese said. “We don’t want to wake him, in case it disturbs him from his work. Besides, I usually like to retire around this time. I have to keep up with my knitting somehow.”

“Yes,” Zoe said, still in awe. “That sounds like a good idea to me.”

28.

ABIGAIL LED Aaron through the streets of Silene, introducing him to the various districts and the people who ran the local businesses and services. She knew everyone by name, and they all knew her. She received free samples of their produce, which she always split in half and shared with Aaron. They were now returning to the castle.

“No one knows how old the town of Silene really is,” Abigail said. “But everyone knows the story of George and the dragon associated with it.”

“George and the dragon?” Aaron said.

“You haven’t heard it?” Abigail said. “It’s pretty famous. Well, so the elders say.”

“I might know of it,” Aaron said. “Refresh my memory.”

“It’s about a dragon that attacked a town, our town the story goes, the town of Silene,” Abigail said. “This was back before we got sucked down a sinkhole and trapped here, when we were on the surface, in England. It attacked and destroyed everything we’d built. It came up out of the lake, killing the locals, drowning its victim as it descended back into its lair.”

“What happened?” Aaron said.

“Well, the town began sacrificing its livestock to the dragon,” Abigail said. “But they soon ran out. And then they began sacrificing their children to the beast. They did it via a random lottery. Whichever two kids’ numbers were chosen, were sent to the beast. Then one day the lord’s daughter’s number came up.

“The lord pleaded with the people, offering half his lands, half his possessions and half his gold. But the townspeople refused, and his daughter was taken down to the lake. It was blind luck that George was passing by. He slayed the dragon and rescued the lord’s daughter.”

“It’s a good story,” Aaron said. “Is there any truth to it, do you think?”

“Who knows,” Abigail said. “You’re from the surface. Could there be much truth to it?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said. “Only in the most abstract terms, I guess. It wouldn’t have been a dragon. It would have been something else, a virus or a lion or some other dangerous thing.”

Abigail shrugged.

“It was just a story,” she said. “That is, until we came down here. History has a funny way of repeating itself.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron said.

“About fifteen years ago some townspeople spoke of hearing growls and roars from the caves,” Abigail said. “No one took any notice of them, but then people started going missing, and before we knew it, we were missing five percent of our population. At first the people went missing in the caves, or near them, and then livestock started going missing, and then people from their own homes. And then one day the townspeople emerged from their homes to see the dragon with their own eyes, pulling a man toward the lake.

“People couldn’t believe what was happening. It wasn’t every day you saw a dragon. People ran to the church and prayed for salvation, for forgiveness for whatever it was they were supposed to have done to offend Him. As always, there was no response, and the killings kept happening. No matter what the people did, no matter what ideas the lord came up with, they always failed.

“We couldn’t sacrifice our livestock. Few enough had survived the sinkhole as it was. They were too valuable.”

“More valuable than people?” Aaron said.

“Sick, isn’t it?” Abigail said. “But true. If we lost every member of our flock there would be no way to replenish their number. We had more people, so they were more valuable. No one said it at the time, of course. But they all knew it. Their lives, and the lives of their children, were worth less than the sheep and the cows and chickens. I’m sure they would have come up with plans to defeat the dragon, but none of them would have worked. They were ill-equipped and badly trained. They would have all perished.

“First, they went through the old people. They mostly gave themselves up. But when they ran out, the decision was made to sacrifice the kids.”

“No,” Aaron said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes,” Abigail said. “Not the best chapter in our history. Kids couldn’t do the workload an adult could, and we couldn’t exactly start culling people who were doing important jobs already.”

“What about the parents of the kids?” Aaron said. “They let this happen?”

“They had no choice,” Abigail said. “They argued and said they would take their kid’s place, but it had been agreed beforehand that the kids would be chosen at random and had no choice but to take their place on the dragon’s platter. Hard to imagine now. There’s a noticeable gap in our demographic. A whole generation that was almost entirely eaten.

“Soon after my parents took over as the lord and lady of the town, they discovered the reason why the lake was always rotting and covered with flies,” Abigail said. “In the past, the townspeople stayed away from the lake, thinking it cursed. And then they discovered bodies were coming up out of the lake. They renamed it Lake Rebirth and fed the bodies to the dragon.

“The killings stopped. The townspeople immediately fell in love with my parents, supporting them with other things they wanted to do, like building a wall to protect themselves, in case the bodies stopped coming out of the lake.

“We made a statue celebrating the event. It shows George defeating the dragon, but really it was my parents that defeated it. It’s on the roof of the tower the inventor now resides in.

“We’re becoming stronger, more populated, and soon we might have the technology and manpower to destroy the dragon. It won’t take a single hero, but a whole town full of them. The statue will reflect the future too, of us overthrowing the monster. You see, our story is not yet complete. We still have to write the final chapter and, with any luck, it will be over very soon.”

29.

THE FAMILY returned to the castle to find another banquet had been laid on. Were they to expect this every night they were present at the castle? The family were tired, but they went through the rigmarole of having to mix with the townspeople again.

Bryan wasn't sure which group he disliked most. The undisguised filth of the streets, or the perfumed stink of the nobles. How could you trust anyone who so obviously attempted to cover up the truth about themselves? In truth, his real dislike was being forced to converse with those he had no choice but to talk to.

There was no such thing as a free lunch, and payment in this case was to have to converse with the locals, who plied them with questions and concerns. They were much more open in their asking of questions than last night, and it made the family exhausted to have to keep answering them.

Finally, happily, the family made it to the front of the hall. They took their seats and prepared to stuff themselves. Conversation was slow at first, the family necking as much of the delicious food as they could into their bodies. Only then did they share what they had discovered and learned with each other. Lots of interesting things, but no sign of the Passage.

The truth was frightening to Bryan. What if the lord was right and there was no Passage out of here? What if it had somehow been destroyed? What if this was as far as they could go? Suddenly the food tasted like ash in Bryan's mouth.

The town of Silene was a perfectly nice place to live, but it was so small and parochial that Bryan wouldn't have been able to live there for long without feeling depressed at everything he'd lost and worked hard for on the surface.

But no, Bryan thought. There had to be a Passage. There was always a Passage. They just hadn't found it yet. The most likely place—if for no other reason than Murphy's Law, was for the Passage to be in the one location they couldn't yet get to: the caves. It would be tucked away in there somewhere.

After the desserts and cakes were served, Lord Maltese took to the stage and addressed the audience. Did any of them have any concerns they wanted to address? After their first round of questions the previous night, and the fact there had been no sign of the dragon for one whole day, meant the locals were more comfortable with their present situation.

“No one?” Lord Maltese said. “Does no one have a concern they would like to address?”

A hand went up. It was at the lord’s head table.

“Bryan?” Lord Maltese said. “You have an enquiry?”

“I do,” Bryan said, getting to his feet. “I have a question for you and the whole town.”

“We’d like to hear it,” Lord Maltese said, retaking his seat.

He was clearly intrigued by Bryan’s intervention.

Bryan stood before the townsfolk.

“I have one question, and it won’t take long,” he said. “You have a dragon problem. It pillaged your livestock, your friends and family. You came up with a solution, by feeding the dragon the bodies of the dead. And you’ve built your walls and developing weapons to protect yourselves. My question, then, is why do you continue to feed the dragon?”

Bryan let the question sink in. A hush came over the audience. Bryan tried to read their expressions, but they were blank.

“Perhaps I might explain,” Lord Maltese said with a friendly smile. “Perhaps my explanation of our situation wasn’t very clear earlier. We feed the dragon so we might live in peace and continue to develop our resources. If we did not feed the monster, it would attack us once again and destroy everything we’ve managed to forge till now.”

“I understand that,” Bryan said. “But why not take the opportunity to kill it?”

Lord Maltese smiled again, as if talking to a slow child.

“As I said before, we lack the resources to mount an attack on the creature,” he said. “It would have torn through us, destroyed us. Decimated our population, and we’d have nothing left to show for it.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “But why didn’t you kill it?”

Lord Maltese frowned. He thought he’d just answered this question.

“I’m not sure I understand…” he said.

“There are more ways to kill a dangerous creature than to attack it head-on,” Bryan said. “You could trap it, drown it, starve it, poison it, burn it…

You’re limited only by your imagination. Once the monster is out of the way, you could continue developing at your own pace in a manner you choose. You’d never have to fear the dragon again.”

There was a shiver of nervous murmurs through the town’s inhabitants. They were entertaining the idea, sounding like a hive of killer bees.

But Bryan wasn’t finished. He had plenty more to say yet.

“There’s also the evidence of tampering,” he said.

“Tampering?” a local said. “What does that mean?”

“It means changing, editing something,” Bryan said. “About a hundred years ago people were beginning to make discoveries of fossils of large animals no one had ever seen before. They were being described as giant crocodiles and iguanas. Over the century that passed, we gained great insight into these ancient creatures. We called them dinosaurs, giant animals that lived millions of years ago all over the surface.

“One of the creatures, one of the most fierce and terrifying, was called a Tyrannosaurus Rex, or T-Rex for short. They were believed to be extinct, like all dinosaurs, until we got sucked through a sinkhole and saw they were very much still alive, deep beneath the Earth’s surface.

“You have one here too. Only it isn’t just a T-Rex, but an altered creature. It carries a metal pack on its back, perhaps as a shield or protection, I don’t know. And the way it breathes fire, that isn’t natural in any living creature. This too could be a machine someone attached to it to make it look more like a dragon.

“On the surface we have advanced technology and could build these things, a way to upgrade a creature like this. I realize these things might seem like magic to you, but I can assure you, they’re not. They’re processes that abide by the laws of science, that we manipulate and use to our advantage. They are not magic. There is no such thing.

“But someone here, or out there, as yet undiscovered by us, is trying to scare you into believing this creature is a dragon, when really it is just a dinosaur in costume.

“How the T-Rex got to be here is anyone’s guess, but it shouldn’t be here. It is a mistake of nature, for you and this creature to be occupying the same space. But it can be undone, and it can be undone by you all.”

A local stood up. It was Montgomery.

“What you suggest is impossible!” he said. “We cannot kill the dragon!”

“It is impossible if you accept it is,” Bryan said. “It doesn’t look impossible from where I sit. I’ve seen people with far less intelligence and technology than you defeat a similar creature in another world. You can too.”

The townsfolk muttered amongst themselves.

“How would you suggest we do it?” Cynthia Morris said, standing up so everyone could hear her loud booming voice.

Bryan was hoping someone would have the courage to ask that question.

“We starve the beast out,” Bryan said. “We stop feeding it.”

The locals exploded into loud outbursts:

“Not feed it?”

“Do you know what it’ll do to us if we stopped? It’ll come for our children!”

“We’ve got a family to worry about!”

“What happens when it gets inside the walls? Then we’ll all be dead!”

Bryan held up his hands to help allay their fears.

“You’re afraid,” he said. “I would be afraid too if I were in your shoes. But look, the world where the bodies come from was destroyed. It means there will no longer be a constant influx of feeding material for the monster. There might be a lot at first, but they will quickly dry up. The monster is going to be starved out anyway. I say we strike while we have control.”

“As soon as the dragon gets in here, with its fiery breath, it’ll destroy our town!” Montgomery said.

“We’ll starve the dragon,” Bryan said. “He’ll come out of his lair. It’ll have no choice but to come out. We’ll have food set up, a trap to kill it. It’s a dumb animal. We can defeat it.”

“I say we let you defeat it!” another local said.

“We can’t let him anger the beast!” Montgomery said. “It’ll come after us after it’s done picking its teeth with his bones!”

“We’re in this trouble because of you!” Cynthia said, pointing a finger at Bryan. “And your family. If you hadn’t come here, the dragon would still be in its cave and we wouldn’t have to be afraid all over again!”

“Leaving you alone to cower in fear,” Bryan said. “To not stand up and fight.”

“I would rather not fight and survive than to stand and die!” Montgomery said.

Lord Maltese stood up, waving his hands to keep the people calm.

“Listen,” he said. “I can see Bryan has gotten you all a little riled up, but the truth is, he might be right. Perhaps it is time for us to rid our world of this demon from hell. It is only flesh and blood. We can destroy it if we only have the will. Perhaps all this time that was what we were really missing: a hero to champion our cause. To aid in Bryan’s effort to destroy the dragon, I will pledge a dozen of our guards to his effort.”

There were murmurs of assent from the locals. Sporadic clapping.

“We always planned to rid ourselves of this beast,” Lord Maltese said. “Perhaps now is the time.”

He raised a goblet.

“To Bryan,” he said. “Our dragon hunter.”

30.

THE TRAP consisted of half a dozen sheep carcasses courtesy of the lord's larder and five buckets of pig blood from the town's butchers. It would be irresistible to the monster.

The breeze was good, blowing in the direction of the caves, carrying the scent with it. There was no way the monster could avoid it. It would drive him berserk.

The trap was a simple one. A series of snares made of high tensile wire had been laid across the ground in a grid pattern. Once the monster approached, the wire would wrap around its foot and draw so tight it would cut into his thick flesh, slicing to the bone if the monster pulled too hard, which Bryan fully expected it would.

Another circle of wire hung suspended in midair in front of the food. This was their failsafe in case the wires on the ground were not sprung. The monster wouldn't see it. Even Bryan couldn't see it—he'd walked into it twice already. A pair of guards stood behind a tree with a rock that hung suspended to the choke wire.

Only once the creature had been adequately ensnared would the soldiers leap forward. Armed with pointed spears and sharp swords, they would hack at the monster as quickly as they were able. These guards were currently camped behind a large rock, along with Bryan and his family, that prevented them from being seen by the monster.

But the creature hadn't shown his face yet, hadn't graced them with his presence, nor even so much as greeted them with a growl. Bryan didn't understand why. The meal should have been irresistible to the monster, who hadn't eaten for the past few days.

"How's it going?" a sweet voice said.

It was Abigail, leading a retinue of serving men to give the soldiers food and refreshment.

"Nothing yet," Aaron said. "He should have come by now. I know I would have, if I was a mindless eating machine. Oh, are those lemon cakes?"

Aaron tucked into them, picking up two in each hand.

“Leave some for the guards,” Bryan said, shaking his head.

“There’s more than enough for everyone to eat,” Abigail said.

“Luckily,” Bryan said. “For everyone else.”

Aaron chuckled around a mouthful of lemon cake, the crumbs spilling from his lips.

There was a roar. It echoed from deep within the cave catacombs.

The lemon cake froze halfway to Aaron’s mouth. He turned deathly pale. Clearly the memory of being chased through the caves by the dinosaur was still fresh in his mind. It was still fresh in Bryan’s too, but he wasn’t about to let it stop him from wiping the beast from the face of the Earth, or the under-Earth, as the case may be.

Bryan wasn’t the only one to turn silent. The servers who’d brought the food had turned white as a ghost, and even the guards, who seemed as hardy as they came, clutched their weapons tight, not in an aggressive stance, but one requiring support.

Bryan was struck by a sudden lack of confidence. Would these men, who had grown up with the fear of the dragon, be able to do what was needed when the time came? To look the dragon in the eye and shove their spears into its heart? Or would they run away, scared and afraid, into the night? There was no doubt in his mind: they would turn and run.

A man was only as brave as his experiences. A man used to darkness could be brave with no light, another accustomed to the roar of great beasts could walk through a pride of lions undisturbed. But a man used to stories of a demon that resided in a cave could not stand against it.

The roars from the caves died down, and the guards returned to their vigil. They stared at the ground and did not eat their cakes and drink.

“How’s the town?” Bryan said.

“It’s fine,” Abigail said. “They’re all nervous, worried you might cause the monster to be angry and attack us. The nobles are glad you’re doing this, that you might put it down for good. Not that they would ever admit that.”

“Of course not,” Bryan said. “That would be too easy.”

As a businessman he knew what people were like. They were generally good and kind hearted, but they could also be very selfish. They were quick to blame, to point the finger, even if the culprit was really themselves.

“It has to come out of there at some point,” Bryan said. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“Time,” Abigail said. “It’s always about time, isn’t it?”

“Time always plays a factor somehow,” Bryan said.

A wagon piled with scorched bodies trundled along a rough path. Just as Bryan had predicted, there had been a massive influx of bodies, no doubt in reaction to the destruction of the magma world they had inhabited. Bryan had been right, and it had drawn nervous consternation from the townsfolk.

Still, they looked upon the floating bodies as their only salvation. They wanted to pick them up and drop them off at the cave for the monster to consume. It was a tried and tested solution to their problem, and they did not like to change it, even if it was for the best, a solution to their problem for the rest of their lives.

The locals didn’t really believe the previous world—hell, in their minds—had really been destroyed, but their eyes goggled when they set eyes upon the burnt feathers of the giant Humungo birds that washed up on the surface of the lake. They had never seen such a beast before. Several of the locals performed a strange little dance, brushing themselves off, turning in a circle, and spitting. It was to dispel bad luck and spirits, Abigail said.

Then, when half a dozen giant snakes emerged, the locals believed the apocalypse was upon them, that the demons of hell were about to descend. There was no telling the locals they were just animals from another world. They had made up their minds and were blind to the truth. It was infuriating. They buried the bodies in giant pits—one for the human bodies, another for the creatures.

The church bell rang.

A voice shouted something from the top of the tower. The distance was too great for Bryan to hear. The ringing seemed different to what was used for when the dragon attacked. That had been a high shrill sound. This was a different rhythm: two taps, followed by a pause. It was repeated over and over. It was smart for the locals to design an intricate system of communication.

“What is he shouting?” Bryan said.

“Murder,” Abigail said. “There’s been a murder.”

The same thought passed between them: while they were watching these cave entrances, was there another one they weren’t aware of, that the

dragon had used to escape and enter the town?

The blood drained from Bryan’s face. Had his plan cost someone’s life?

31.

THEY HAD to wait at the front entrance before the gates were opened. Five minutes is an agonizingly long time when forced to wait. When your loved ones were inside the town. When there had been a murder and you don’t know who the victim was.

The gates opened, revealing pandemonium. People ran riot, not knowing what they were doing or where they were going.

Bryan dismounted and handed the reins to one of the guards. He pushed through the crowd, grunting when someone ran into him.

He came to group of people standing around. They glanced at Bryan as he pushed through them. They turned their eyes from him. Bryan’s insides turned to water.

Something was wrong.

Was it Zoe or Cassie who had been hurt? Had the locals felt so aggrieved with Bryan’s plan that they would act with violence against his family?

Bryan pushed harder through the crowd. The people saw him and began to move aside. Then he came to the wide clearing in the center.

There were a dozen guards, doing their best to block the view of a body lying on the ground, but failing. There was blood, spread like a finger painting by a child.

“What happened here?” Bryan said. “What happened?”

“Murder,” a bystander said. “Murdered in cold blood.”

He said it in a tone of voice that made it clear this was not a common occurrence in the town of Silene.

Bryan stared at the unmoving body. It wasn’t Cassie, nor Zoe. It was Cynthia, the loud-voiced woman from the hall meetings. Her face was twisted in a mask of shock.

Peering around, with the locals eyeballing Bryan the way they were, it was clear at whose feet they placed the blame.

32.

THE GREAT HALL was crammed. Every member of town was present. A meeting had been called, an impromptu affair. None of the chairs and tables had been set out as they had during feast days.

The people milled, mumbling with folded arms to angry neighbors. Bryan sensed a strong atmosphere of discontent. The locals eyed him and his family as they took their place on the stage.

Bryan didn't entirely understand what was going on. These were essentially the middle ages. Did they still hang people? Or cut off their heads? There was a fiery anger and hate in their eyes that he had rarely seen.

"Silence, please," Lord Maltese said.

The people quietened down.

"Today we have suffered a great tragedy," Lord Maltese said. "Cynthia Morris, one of our number, was brutally slain in the street, by someone armed with a cloak and dagger. Who would commit such a crime, and for what reason, to an innocent bystander, is anyone's guess. But the police and my guards are working together to find the perpetrator."

"It was the evil spirits!" Montgomery said. "We angered the monster and he sent spirits here to do his bidding!"

"'He's an animal," Lord Maltese said. "He doesn't bid, doesn't do anything any other animal can't do."

"Hidden in shadow, he was," another local said, apparently present at the murder when it'd happened. "Wearing the darkness and shadows as a cape!"

"Wearing a black cape," Lord Maltese said. "Not shadows and darkness. Though we can say the killer certainly had darkness in his heart. The police are conducting an investigation and I'm confident we will find the murderer."

"What are we all pussy footing around for?" Montgomery said with folded arms. "We all know who's responsible for this."

"Their plan caused poor Cynthia's murder!" a fearful local said. "I'd rather it was their blood than any of ours! I say we sacrifice them before

another one of us has to die!”

“Yeah!” the crowd said.

“We didn’t want anyone to die!” Zoe said, stepping forward. “It’s the last thing we wanted to happen. And who knows, this might have happened anyway, no matter what we tried to do with the monster.”

But the crowd—the mob, really—was not appeased. They wanted blood. Suddenly Bryan realized how dangerous their situation was. At least if a monster was after you it didn’t smile at you through its teeth. It was honest with its intentions. It was out to eat you, to feed upon your flesh.

Now, the townsfolk’s mask had slipped. They had pretended to be the family’s friends when they first arrived, but now they wanted their blood. The people had judged them once again on the result, and not the objective, what it was they were trying to achieve, to make the world a better, safer place. Instead, the locals were intent on crucifying them.

There was only one man who could save them, one man who could get the locals to calm down, relax. Bryan turned to the lord and his family.

“Please,” Bryan mouthed. “Help us.”

He thought he caught sight of a small smile on the lord’s lips, one that did not look entirely accommodating.

But the lord got to his feet, and set his shirt collar and sleeves straight. He was enjoying himself, getting comfortable for what he was about to say. He looked up and addressed the crowd.

“This is not anyone’s fault,” Lord Maltese said. “Did any member of this family wield a knife? Did they attack the victim? Of course not. Bryan and Aaron were outside the town at the time, working to protect us, all of us. Zoe and Cassie were with Jeffrey, working on his designs. I myself can attest to that. They aren’t responsible.

“Are farmers responsible for the bad weather if the crops they planted die? Of course not. Should we have trusted a stranger and his family? Yes, we should. We didn’t care who they were. We made the decision to listen to them, to want to do what they wanted, and not care about the outcome. Because it was worth it. To rid the world of the dragon forever? It was a good plan, but it just didn’t work out, that’s all. And here we stand, ready to kill them for it.

“This is a tragedy, no doubt about it. We should focus on finding the perpetrator so we can get on with our lives and get on with what we’re doing, with developing and making our future brighter.”

The locals didn’t seem very sated, their anger still plain on their faces. But they broke, and the mob began to disperse and head out the door.

“What do we do now?” Zoe said. “I’m not sure I feel very comfortable with all these people here, wanting to kill us.”

“Don’t go anywhere by yourself,” Bryan said. “No one goes out by themselves, under any circumstances.”

The dragon was no longer their greatest threat.

33.

THE FUNERAL was a sad, dour affair, at total odds with the one in the previous world where it had been normal to burn bodies in pits of red hot magma. Here, it was more akin to what happened up on the surface, with a priest reading from a Bible over the body of the dead, family and friends gathered around.

They were in the church's graveyard, a pretty spot that backed up to a small grove of trees. There were many other tombstones here, dating back several centuries. Several were clearly very recent, the soil of the graves still visible where the grass had not yet grown through.

Everyone wore black, matching their sad expressions. The murder had come as a shock. The victim had been a baker's assistant, Bryan learned from the eulogy. Her rolls were the envy of the whole town. Her secret recipe would be buried with her.

The undertaker began shoveling dirt on the casket. The crowd began to disperse, filtering off in various directions. The family left too, heading their own way.

"We were close to trapping the monster too," Bryan said. "If we could have waited just a little longer, a few more days, we would have had him. I'm sure of it."

"Hm," Zoe said.

Bryan looked at Zoe. She was wearing a frown.

"What is it?" Bryan said.

"It's the murder," Zoe said. "What are the odds it would happen right then of all times? Right when you were there, trying to catch the monster?"

"You're saying it was used as a distraction?" Bryan said.

"Yes," Zoe said. "At least, it is a possibility, don't you think?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "It is certainly that."

"It makes more sense, now I think about it," Zoe said. "No natural creature could breathe fire the way it does. It was designed. We know that. But who designed it?"

"You think someone here designed it?" Bryan said.

“What other explanation can there be?” Zoe said. “How else can a dinosaur breathe fire? And someone put that metal shield on its back. I’m betting the person who did that was the same person who murdered Cynthia.”

“Why would someone do that?” Bryan said.

“To stop us searching the caves,” Zoe said.

“You’re saying there’s something in there someone here is willing to murder for?” Bryan said.

“Yes,” Zoe said. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Who knows, it might even be the Passage they’re trying to keep hidden.”

“It seems to me you’re talking about the same thing,” Cassie said. “We want to find the Passage. If we’re right, and Cynthia was murdered in order to distract us from capturing the monster, then if we can find the murderer…”

“We also find the person responsible for the dragon,” Zoe said. “Ingenious.”

“In that case, isn’t it obvious who did the murder?” Aaron said.

The others turned to look at him. Aaron checked over his shoulders in case someone was close enough to hear, but they were alone.

“There’s only one person here capable of making the technology the T-Rex now wears,” Aaron said.

“Who?” Zoe said.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Aaron said.

Zoe ran the evidence through her mind, her eyes widening at Aaron’s thought process and the conclusion he must have come to.

“No,” she said. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious,” Aaron said. “Can you think of anyone else who might be capable of designing such advanced technology?”

“But he’s not capable!” Zoe said. “You’ve seen him!”

“It could all be an act,” Bryan said. “The perfect camouflage. To disguise himself as a bumbling idiot genius.”

“But he’s shown his hand,” Zoe said. “His skills betray him. It’s Jeffrey!”

34.

“JEFFREY?” Lord Maltese said. “Our inventor, Jeffrey? We’re talking about the same person? You can’t be serious. He wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

“He did hurt a fly once,” Abigail said. “I was there. I saw him do it.”

“It’s a figure of speech,” Lord Maltese said, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t care,” Abigail said, pursing her lips. “It’s true. He did hurt a fly once.”

“I, for one, am not surprised,” Roland said. “He always seemed a bit fishy to me.”

“But where is your evidence?” Lady Maltese said. “And even if he is guilty, he already lives like a hermit. What else can we do to him? Taking away his workshop will harm us more than it does him. We would only be hurting ourselves.”

“So we’re supposed to just let him get away with it?” Lord Maltese said. “Because he’s of use to the town? He shouldn’t be punished if it turns out he is responsible for Cynthia’s death?”

“No one would have to know about it,” Lady Maltese said. “We could keep it between ourselves. Then he could carry on doing what he does.”

“And murdering other innocent people,” Lord Maltese said. “No. The people must have justice, whatever form that takes.”

“This is all academic,” Lady Maltese said. “Until we speak with him and either he confesses or the police discover the evidence for themselves.”

“Why haven’t they figured out it was Jeffrey too?” Aaron said.

“Because they’re approaching it as police investigators investigating a crime,” Bryan said. “We’re looking at it from the outside. Whether Jeffrey is responsible for it or not there’s no denying the fact he must be responsible for what was done to the T-Rex. I’m betting that before he came along, the T-Rex never had the ability to breathe fire, did he?”

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Should we go to the police?” Zoe said.

“No,” Lord Maltese said. “What you say makes sense, assuming any of it is true. But he has become a friend of the family. The least we can do is

confront him in person before we contact the authorities. I wouldn't want to undermine our friendship now."

The lord stood up.

"Come on then," he said. "Let's get this over with."

35.

THE DOOR squeaked open on ancient hinges. The room inside was dusty and packed to the rafters with items. Most of it Zoe could name but there were some things she had no name for, nor idea what they were meant to do.

It was a dream world for hoarders of useless garbage, and amongst this rubble, like a bomb had gone off, was meant to lie the hope and future of this world. If that was true, this world was in bigger trouble than Zoe thought.

“Jeffrey?” Lady Maltese said out loud to the room.

The armchair where he was usually fast asleep was vacant, the depression his body had made pressed into it. The chair had been disturbed, slightly off its axis, a small coffee table knocked over, spilling a cup of tea or coffee over the tiled floor.

The rest of the room was its usual mess, of course, but it was a well-ordered chaos, the kind of space where the occupant knew where everything was, that if pushed, he could recall precisely where he’d put every object.

But there was something somehow wrong with the whole situation, as if it had been set up for their benefit. Nothing about this room felt like it had before. All the warmth had been stripped from it, and when they rounded the corner, they could see why.

Zoe’s hand went to her mouth, covering her shock. She turned back to block the kids’ view, and even the lord’s kids, but it was too late. They’d already gotten an eyeful.

Zoe turned them away in any case, and led them back toward the door, to look out the window at the regular world and the town where everything was business as usual. Zoe for one needed the air.

Each time Zoe blinked she saw another image behind her eyelids, of Jeffrey’s wrinkled hand, outstretched and reaching for something across the tiles, of his face hidden from her, pressed to the hard floor. His straggling hair, so much like Einstein’s wayward style, stuck out at odd

angles. His body was twisted into a position his large frame was not used to, a yoga pose that forced the joints beyond their usual extremes.

Zoe and the others had seen a lot of death over the past couple of weeks, but it had always been in the pursuit of something, had been unavoidable. And it had always occurred in foreign and dangerous situations. This death happened in familiar settings, in a room that Zoe had been in before. She had met the old man that was now dead.

We all have a clock, Zoe thought morbidly, and none of us really know how much time we have left. To a large extent, it didn't really matter how much time you had remaining. It was how you used that time to enjoy yourself, the quality of time, that was the most important thing.

Bryan crouched over the dead body, inspecting it.

"What happened to him?" Cassie said.

"I don't know," Zoe said. "I know as much as you."

Her mind was working on overdrive, coming up with wild theories. Where these theories came from, Zoe didn't know. Probably from a lifetime of stories and movies and TV shows, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something bad and underhanded had taken place.

It wasn't long before Bryan came over.

"Are you all okay?" he said.

He hugged them each in turn, and gave a comforting smile to the lord's kids.

"We're fine," Zoe said. "What happened to him?"

"Heart attack," Bryan said.

"But there was blood…" Zoe said.

"He hit his head when he fell," Bryan said. "He cut open his nose and forehead, spilling the blood over the floor."

"That's terrible," Zoe said. "That he had to die alone."

"According to the lord and lady, he was often alone," Bryan said. "It was inevitable he would go by himself."

"I suppose," Zoe said.

She set the crazy theories and conjecture in her mind aside. The death had been entirely natural, though what the town was going to do without their beloved inventor, Zoe didn't know.

He may have been a little crazy, having used his technology to make the dragon an even more deadly foe, but he had also been the light and

salvation of the town’s future. How were they going to cope without him now?

36.

THE NEXT few days passed slowly. The family searched for the Passage in every nook and cranny of the world, save the caves. The dragon stayed in its hovel, not bothering to come out. No doubt it had had its fill somewhere.

As predicted, the number of bodies coming out of Lake Rebirth had trickled to a stop. Starving hungry, the monster would be forced to attack the town. It was the only food source around.

Bryan warned the lord about this, that they should maintain vigil over the trap they had set, but the town still blamed Bryan for Cynthia's death and the lord seemed unwilling to rail against his townsfolk supporters.

Lord Maltese had installed the world's greatest engineers and inventors in Jeffrey's former tower. They worked hard, but couldn't make head nor tail of his designs.

Bryan assisted them as best he could, but he was severely limited by the technology of the time. There were so many fields of expertise on the surface that it boggled the mind. He needed all of them if he was to replicate the kind of prototypes Jeffrey had designed.

Funny, that the destruction of one world could have such a devastating impact on another, and it would continue to do so. It just went to show how inextricably linked each of these independent worlds truly were.

While he was out searching for the Passage, Bryan ran Jeffrey's inventions through his mind. He worked with the other engineers in the evenings. Though he couldn't say he helped with the inventions much, he was able to teach the young engineers about advanced engineering.

They were empty, but hungry, receptacles, ready to absorb everything he had to tell them. It was refreshing to find such willing young minds. It opened him up to the concept of becoming a teacher one day, should they ever manage to get to the surface.

They needed to get to the caves, Bryan felt. There was nowhere more likely for the Passage to be than amongst its catacombs. But they couldn't enter it, not until the monster was no longer there. Most likely while it was attacking the town.

He and Zoe talked long and hard about what they would do in such a situation. They decided they wouldn't leave the town that had been so kind to them—relatively speaking—and would stand beside them and fight.

But if the fight turned against them, and it was clear the dragon was going to overpower and destroy the town, then the family would escape to the caves and take refuge, searching for the Passage.

The dragon would eventually return, the caves being its home, but they could take their time, learn the monster's routine, and work their way through the caverns one by one until they discovered what they were looking for. It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was the best they had.

It wasn't until the third evening of the third day after the inventor's passing that a thought struck Bryan, coming at him from an unexpected angle.

The giant feasts had come to an end, the excitement of a vibrant future gone in the wind. Aaron worked with Bryan in the evenings sometimes, to help educate the engineers on subjects Bryan had no clue about—predominantly wildlife and nature. It was after one of these events, during a discussion over dinner, that Bryan had his brainwave.

"The more I learn about Jeffrey, the more I realize how incredible he truly was," Aaron said, spearing a slice of steak with his fork. "I mean, being able to think so far ahead into the future like that, it's remarkable. He was like Da Vinci, but with the engineering skills to back it up. He was one of a kind. There won't have been many people like him in our history. His death was a real loss."

"With his death went the future of our people," Lord Maltese said. "We'll survive, but that wasn't what I wanted when I became lord. I wanted to do more than survive. I wanted to thrive."

Lady Maltese put a comforting hand on her husband's arm and gave him a supportive, tight-lipped smile.

"We'll be all right," she said. "You'll see."

"With time, you'll piece together what the inventor had scribbled on those pieces of paper," Zoe said.

"Time," Lord Maltese said. "The one resource we do not have."

Time.

There was something about that, Bryan thought. Time. He turned his head to one side and set his fork down. Zoe saw him do it, and lowered her head to whisper to him.

“Are you all right?” she said.

“Yes,” Bryan said with a frown. “Yes, I’m fine. Excuse me.”

He got up and moved for the stairs, brow knitted in deep thought. He moved up the stairs without remembering he took a single one, and went to his and Zoe’s shared room. He moved to the balcony, leaned against it, and peered out over the town.

“Time,” he said out loud.

It was ten minutes before the door opened, admitting Zoe.

“Are you all right?” Zoe said. “It’s not like you to leave before the dessert course.”

“I’m fine,” Bryan said, still distracted.

“You’re not going to work with the engineers tonight are you?” Zoe said. “You need a night off. Time to recharge your batteries.”

“Time,” Bryan said abruptly.

“What?” Zoe said.

“Time,” Bryan said. “It’s all about time.”

“What is?” Zoe said.

“The inventor,” Bryan said. “He was ahead of his time. Too far ahead. He couldn’t have known the things he knew, couldn’t have dreamed the things he did.”

“But he did,” Zoe said.

“Says who?” Bryan said.

“Says everyone in town,” Zoe said.

“But no one ever saw him making these things,” Bryan said. “No one ever saw him do much more than make vague sketches from his dreams.”

“The mind is an incredible thing,” Zoe said.

“It is,” Bryan said. “But it is limited by the time in which it exists. Da Vinci was a genius, no doubt about it. He could look at nature and extrapolate ideas based on that. But if there was no nature, he wouldn’t have had the ideas.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Zoe said. “Because Jeffrey had dreams. That was his input.”

“But where do dreams come from?” Bryan said. “From our everyday lives. Input. Experiences. He couldn’t have dreamed about the things they say he did. This is the real world. Things like that don’t happen.”

“Then where did he get his ideas from?” Zoe said.

“From his own experiences,” Bryan said. “And time. He wasn’t from this time, anymore than the dragon is. He came here via a sinkhole. He was from our time.”

“If he was, why wouldn’t he just tell the locals here?” Zoe said.

“Maybe he liked to be thought of as a genius,” Bryan said. “Look at the comfortable lifestyle he has down here. All he had to do was come up with something from the surface and pass it off as his own, and then build it—if he could.”

“I don’t buy it,” Zoe said. “The inventor wasn’t that kind of person.”

“To build these things, he needed to have real engineering experience,” Bryan said. “I studied engineering and I know how difficult these things are to build armed only with ancient materials.”

“Then how did he build them?” Zoe said.

“No one ever saw him making these things, why not, if he really was an engineer?” Bryan said. “It leaves one possible explanation.”

“What?” Zoe said.

“He didn’t build them,” Bryan said. “Someone did it for him.”

“What?” Zoe said.

“Someone else down here is from the surface,” Bryan said. “And used Jeffrey as a cover. The real inventor is still alive. He’s among us.”

37.

WITH THE DRAGON growing hungrier by the day, their time was growing short. It would attack the town and harvest innocent people to sate its hunger. If Bryan wanted to test his hypothesis he needed to hurry.

He told the lord and lady there was an experiment he wished to carry out. It would help to shed light on their current situation, but that he couldn't tell them what the test entailed.

"You want me to have the whole town take part in an experiment, an experiment you won't tell me the purpose of?" Lord Maltese said. "Have I got that right?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "It will take just a little of their time, but it will be worth it."

"And you can't tell me anything about it?" Lord Maltese said.

"No, sir," Bryan said.

The lord paced up and down his study twice before turning to Bryan.

"How can I tell the people to do something without explaining to them what it is?" he said.

"The same as I have done with you," Bryan said. "They trust you. They will do as you say. I want you to trust me."

"Trust you?" Lord Maltese said.

"Yes," Bryan said. "No one will come to any harm. This is for the benefit of the whole town. If we can get them organized, it needn't take long."

The lord thought about Bryan's suggestion for ten minutes, in silence, before he nodded.

"Very well," he said. "But it had better work."

The church bell rang, a curious triple tap and long pause, repeated over and over. Everyone stopped working and spilled out of their homes and places of work, into the street. They walked to the castle and lined up outside.

They were told nothing about why they were there or what they were meant to do, besides line up and wait, that it would take just a few minutes, and none of them would come to any harm.

Speculation was rife. The longer they stood outside waiting, the weirder and more outlandish the theories became. Only children under fifteen were exempt from the experiment. Even the old and infirm had to take part.

The townsfolk stood outside the castle on the eastern side. They formed a long queue along the wall that wrapped around to the northern side. They hid their worry and concern behind jovial expressions. Really, they were all very nervous.

38.

LEONARD, or Lenny to his friends, was the first in line.

He worked at the tannery across the road from the castle, so he had less distance to travel. He'd always liked the fact he was so close to the castle, where he could see the comings and goings of the lord and lady. And having the guards so close always made him feel protected, not that there was ever much to fear in the town of Silene. But now it felt like a threat, having to be the first to do whatever they were there for.

The door opened, and the girl from the new family—he thought her name was Cassie—was there to welcome him inside. Only he was allowed in. The door shut behind him, causing Lenny to jump.

"Please come this way," Cassie said.

She led him to a small room. There were guards arranged at regular intervals. A plain table sat in the middle with four boxes on it. The rest of the family stood behind the table.

"Hello," Bryan said. "Please come in."

Lenny realized he was shaking.

"Am I in trouble?" he said.

"Not at all," Bryan said. "We're just going to conduct a little test. It will only take a few minutes and won't hurt. Please step up to the table."

The test was over within a few minutes. Lenny studied the family's expression to gauge whether he had performed the test well or not, but their faces were cold and emotionless. He was ushered out of the room, to the main hall. There were guards here too.

"Please don't go anywhere," Cassie said. "Others will be joining you shortly. There's water and food on the table there."

And she was gone. Lenny felt very nervous in the room alone. He eyed the guards uncertainly, before taking a seat at one of the dining tables. Within minutes, someone else entered, and though Lenny didn't know them all that well, he was at least familiar with him, having seen him around town.

He was a street cleaner, Lenny thought, though he wasn't certain. It was a friendly face, and he looked equally pleased to see Lenny too.

They didn’t talk about the test. They didn’t want to get in trouble for it. For all they knew, this might be part of the test too. But by the third and fourth people who joined them, they were ready to talk about what they’d experienced, both the similarities and differences.

The natural question became what was the test all about? Although they each had a theory, none of them knew the answer. Their own explanations were good enough for them.

As their number grew, they relaxed. There was safety in numbers. But as they would soon discover, there was one among them who it was certainly unwise to trust.

39.

IT TOOK all day, but eventually the family worked their way through each town member. Bryan was surprised to find not one person matched what they were looking for. They had a few suspects, but nothing concrete.

“Next,” Bryan said.

No one came in.

“Next!” Bryan said.

The boredom of repetition had made his temper short. Still no one came into the room. Zoe moved to the door, opened it, and peered into the corridor. Cassie spread her hands.

“That’s everyone,” she said.

“Everyone?” Bryan said. “It can’t be. Are you sure?”

“There’s no one else outside,” Cassie said.

Bryan fell back into a chair.

“After all this, we still don’t know if someone—if anyone—came from the surface,” he said.

“We have a few suspects,” Zoe said.

“No one concrete,” Bryan said.

“He must be a better actor than we thought,” Cassie said.

“There really isn’t anyone else left?” Bryan said.

Cassie shook her head.

“Then we’ve just wasted the whole town’s time without any good reason,” Bryan said. “How am I supposed to explain this to everyone? To the lord?”

Aaron’s eyes glinted.

“We haven’t checked them yet,” he said.

“Who?” Cassie said.

“The lord’s family,” Aaron said.

“The kids are too young,” Zoe said. “They wouldn’t qualify for the test anyway. No way a kid that age could pull something like this off.”

“But there is still the lord and lady,” Bryan said. “I suppose we should do them too, otherwise people would accuse us of favoritism.”

“Shall I go get them?” Zoe said.

“No,” Bryan said. “I’ll do it. If anyone should get the blame, it’s me.”

40.

“WE’VE ALMOST concluded the experiment,” Bryan said.

“Excellent,” Lord Maltese said, setting aside the book he’d been reading. “Any results? Can you tell me what this was all in aid of now?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bryan said. “At least, not yet. There are a couple more participants we have to examine.”

“Then you’d best get on with it, hadn’t you?” Lord Maltese said. “The sooner you finish, the sooner we can all get on with our lives.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Bryan said.

“For what?” Lord Maltese said.

“To conclude the experiment,” Bryan said.

Lord Maltese’s eyes moved to the side in thought, and then snapped up as he realized what Bryan was saying.

“You’ve got some nerve,” he said. “You asked me to trust you, to run an experiment on the town, without telling me what it was you wanted to do, and this whole time you planned on subjecting my wife and I to the same test? I must insist you tell me what the purpose of the test is. Right this instant.”

“That would undermine the test,” Bryan said. “I don’t mean any offense. But if the people heard that you didn’t have to undergo the test, and they did, what kind of message do you think that would send them?”

The lord pursed his lips. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t deny Bryan’s logic.

“We ought to just do the test,” Lady Maltese said, setting her knitting aside. “Get it over with.”

“Fine,” Lord Maltese said. “But I’ll go first. If I decide it’s something unsuitable for my lady wife, then I will refuse to let her take part.”

“Fair enough,” Bryan said. “But I can assure you, it is not something you need to worry about.”

“I’ll fetch the children,” Lady Maltese said.

“There’s no need,” Bryan said. “They’re too young to take the test.”

“At least we’re spared that much,” Lord Maltese said.

They followed Bryan out of their chambers and down the stairs to the corridor outside the test room.

“If you’ll take a seat,” Bryan said to Lady Maltese. “We won’t be a minute.”

Lady Maltese took a seat, careful to arrange her skirts around her.

“We will be parted but for a moment, my dear,” Lord Maltese said.

He turned the smile he aimed at his wife into a grim scowl as he entered the room. The lord folded his arms and appraised the room.

“So?” he said. “This is it? Four boxes on a table?”

“Yes,” Bryan said, taking his place behind the table. “If you’ll approach, please. As you can see, there are four boxes. What I want you to do is very simple. I’ll say a color, and you’ll open that box color. You’ll take out the object inside and, if you can, tell me what its purpose is.”

“Very well,” Lord Maltese said.

“Yellow,” Bryan said.

The lord approached the box and lifted the lid. His face registered surprise, followed by a frown, his eyebrows performing their full range of movement. He picked the object up. It was a cellphone, not that the lord knew that. He pressed the screen, the top and back. It was an alien object. There was no power, the battery long dead.

“What is this?” Lord Maltese said.

“That’s what you need to tell me,” Bryan said.

“I’m sure I have no idea,” Lord Maltese said. “A weapon of some kind?”

“Good guess,” Bryan said.

“I’m wrong?” Lord Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Though it could be used as a weapon, I suppose. In dire situations.”

“Have I passed the test?” Lord Maltese said.

“I’ll reveal the result in a moment in the great hall,” Bryan said.

Lord Maltese pressed his lips together.

“Very well,” he said.

He put the cellphone back in the box and replaced the lid. He turned on his heel and headed back toward the door to the corridor where his wife was waiting.

“Where are you going?” Bryan said.

“To tell my wife it’s nothing to be afraid of,” Lord Maltese said.

“I’m afraid you can’t go back out to speak with her,” Bryan said.

“Why ever not?” Lord Maltese said.

“It undermines the experiment,” Bryan said. “None of the others could go back through those doors. You can’t either.”

The lord’s eyes narrowed.

“This had better be worth it, that’s all I can say,” he said.

“It will be,” Bryan said, bluffing.

Lord Maltese left through the adjacent door and entered the main hall.

“What are we going to do?” Zoe said. “This is a nightmare.”

Their little test had been a colossal waste of time and effort. There was nothing they had learned from this experience, and with just Lady Maltese remaining, it looked like it wasn’t going to be useful after all. What was Bryan going to say when he addressed the people?

They would be angry. A mob might form. They were already annoyed at the family, blaming them for Cynthia’s murder, maybe even for Jeffrey’s death for all Bryan knew.

“We did our best,” Zoe said. “We’ll just have to face the music when the time comes.”

“Lady Maltese is still waiting in the hall,” Cassie said.

“Go get her,” Bryan said. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

Cassie moved to the door, opened it, and asked Lady Maltese to come in. She looked supremely confident when she entered—a far cry from the locals who they’d seen all day. That was what came with having power and authority, Bryan supposed. You grew used to wielding it, until it became a part of who you were as a person.

“Where do you want me?” Lady Maltese said.

“In front of the table, please,” Bryan said. “It’s very simple. I say a color, and you open the matching colored box. You tell me what the object inside is and its purpose, if you can.”

“Okay,” Lady Maltese said.

“Red,” Bryan said.

Lady Maltese moved to the box at the end and lifted the lid. She was surprised, her eyebrows rising. Then she smiled, her relief palpable. She reached inside and picked the item up. It was a digital watch. There was a crack on its face, but that didn’t remove its purpose.

“It has numbers on it,” Lady Maltese said. “So I’d guess something to do with counting?”

There was a pause.

“Thank you,” Bryan said. “That was excellent. Please go through to the great hall. We’ll be in shortly.”

“Was that it?” Lady Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “That was all.”

Lady Maltese replaced the box’s top and crossed the room to the door and left.

The family were silent once she had gone. They were still taking in what had just happened.

41.

THE HALL quietened to silence as Bryan and his family took to the raised dais. Only their footsteps made any sound. Bryan wasn't quite sure how to proceed. He stood side-on to the crowd so he could address them as well as the lord and lady.

"Is your test complete?" Lord Maltese said.

"It is," Bryan said. "We have tested everyone of the appropriate age and we have discovered who we were looking for. But first, let us explain our process and how we went about it so you might all understand how we came to our final result."

Bryan took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

"It began with Jeffrey, the inventor," he said. "The fact someone so talented might exist here of all places was next to impossible."

"Why's that?" Roland said.

"Sorry?" Bryan said.

"Why was it next to impossible for someone like the inventor to exist down here?" Roland said.

It sounded confrontational, but really Roland was helping him. He didn't want the crowd to turn on Bryan just because of a few unexplained holes in his story.

"Thank you for the clarification question," Bryan said. "The answer is because here, there is a population of a thousand. On the surface we have billions, and even then, it took many hundreds of thousands of years for us to receive a person capable of what your inventor was—Isaac Newton.

"When faced with the problem of how planets moved around our sun not in a circle, but an inverted ellipse, he went away to his house for several months and came up with a completely new form of mathematics to explain it.

"We then had to wait several more hundred years before someone could greatly improve on his ideas—Albert Einstein. But even they could not see the future and build items related to it. I was taken in with Jeffrey's legend too, but what he reportedly did was actually impossible."

“Then how do you explain how the inventor could do these things?” Lord Maltese said. “Clearly he had some ability.”

“No,” Zoe said. “We now think someone else built these items and made it look like Jeffrey had come up with them.”

“Why would someone do that?” Lord Maltese said.

“To give themselves some protection,” Bryan said.

“Why would they do that?” Lord Maltese said. “Why wouldn’t they want to be known as a genius?”

“Because they’re not a genius,” Aaron said. “They’re an excellent engineer from the surface. That’s all.”

Murmurs broke out amongst the congregation.

“From the surface?” Abigail said. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Bryan said. “That was why we had this experiment.”

“Why did you run the experiment the way you did?” Lady Maltese said. “I don’t see how it can show you much, beyond how creative the participant is at guessing the use of a given object.”

“Except, of course, that wasn’t what we were really testing,” Bryan said. “We didn’t care if the person could figure out what the use of their item was. That wasn’t our real test. We were testing something entirely different.”

“There wasn’t much else within the test, was there?” Lord Maltese said.

“On the face of it, no,” Bryan said. “But there was if you think back clearly. The real test was the participant’s reaction to what was in the box.”

“The person’s reaction?” Lord Maltese said.

“Yes,” Bryan said. “The human mind is exceptionally good at distinguishing emotions. We might disagree with very subtle emotions, but the big explosive ones—anger, happiness, confusion etc—are almost always universally agreed. That was why there were four of us, the whole family, in the room. We were each gauging the participant’s reaction to the item in the box. If we all agreed what the emotion was—which we almost universally did—then we knew who we were looking for and who we could safely ignore.

“There were a couple of participants in this very hall who we considered potentials for having come from the surface. Why? Because their expressions were not what we were expecting. They may very well have shown surprise at what was in the box, who wouldn’t with the futuristic fantasy objects we’d put in there?

But it was the reaction to that surprise that we were really looking for. How did they feel about being surprised? Angry? Confused? Those emotions would have been totally understandable given the situation. But relief? Satisfaction? Happiness? These are not likely. And that is what we used to identify the person from the surface."

"Why didn't you just ask everyone?" Lord Maltese said. "I'm sure the person from the surface would have admitted where they came from."

"No," Bryan said. "We don't believe they would. They're so used to hiding in plain sight, so used to acting, that we would never have been able to identify them, not without the latest in detection technology from the surface. We just had us."

"Then who is it?" Lord Maltese said. "Save us the suspense and reveal to us who this mysterious surfacer is, who has so successfully been hiding amongst us all these years."

"Very well," Bryan said. "But the result might come as quite a shock."

He took a deep breath and turned to face the lord's family. Finally his eyes shifted to the figure sitting beside the lord in her high backed throne-like chair.

"It's Lady Maltese," Bryan said.

42.

A DEATHLY silence filled the great hall. You could have heard a pin drop. One thousand pairs of eyes turned as one to look at the Lady Maltese, whose face was carved from stone.

The lord smacked his fists on the armrests of his armchair and got to his feet.

“This is outrageous!” he said. “We give you food, lodging, the use of our guards and our great hall, and you accuse my wife, Lady Maltese, of being from the surface? She and her family have been here for generations! Her family can be traced right back to the very origins of our town. Why, if you go to England on the surface I’m sure you’ll find she has evidence of her roots going back even farther.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “I believe you.”

“Then why are you pointing the finger of accusation at my beloved?” Lord Maltese said.

“Because she may not originally be from her noble house,” Bryan said. “She may have taken the original noble daughter’s position in the household, may have usurped her place, all in an effort to take control of the town. She is from the surface. She is the one with the engineering abilities.

“Do you think me a fool?” Lord Maltese said. “Don’t you think I would have noticed—that someone would have noticed—if my lady was from the surface?”

“You don’t find what you’re not looking for,” Bryan said.

“How would she even be able to do what you say?” Lord Maltese said. “She runs a household. She does not have the time to design such things, even if she were capable.”

“She retires every day, does she not?” Zoe said, stepping forward. “To her chambers, where she likes to be alone to sit and contemplate. And knit. She showed me some of her knitting once. I was astonished. I’ve never seen a faultless piece of work like that before. It was unlike anything a human can do, without fault.

“It was made by a machine. She will have it hidden in her chambers somewhere, I’m sure. She put it on while she sneaked out of her rooms and into Jeffrey’s tower, plying him with alcohol laced with a sedative, to send him to sleep. She encouraged him to draw what he dreamed, but they were normal dreams, and of little meaning. Simple lumps and shapes we’ve all had over the years.

“Meanwhile, she drew the detailed designs. She even made them. All while Jeffrey slept. And when she was done, she returned to her chambers, where she put away the knitting machine and took up the needles. She never really knitted a single stitch. All this could be forgiven, of course. A little harmless covering up. We could all understand that.

“But it’s not all she’s done over the years. She killed Jeffrey, no doubt in an attempt to conceal her tracks, by letting Jeffrey take the fall for the murder, just as he had taken credit for her inventions. But it was she who killed Cynthia in town, all to distract attention from the dragon she either installed here or simply manipulated.

“We’re not sure how she did that, how she brought the T-Rex here from another world, or if it was blind luck the dinosaur came here at the same time she did, but in either case, she took full advantage of it. She altered the dinosaur so it could breathe fire, to make it more of a danger to this town with its wooden walls. She controls the monster somehow, perhaps via an implant in its brain. Such things aren’t unheard of on the surface.”

“I don’t believe that,” Lord Maltese said. “Any of it.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Bryan said. “Look at your wife.”

The lord seemed unable to do so, afraid of what he might see on her face. Bryan felt sorry for him. What if there was confirmation on her features? What if she nodded and it showed him who she truly was? What if all these years had been a sham and a farce, an act, that she never really loved him. And the children…

The children.

They would be the greatest tragedy of all, conceived in a web of lies. They would be the living embodiment of her manipulation. Despite the difficulty, Lord Maltese finally began to turn and face his lady.

His expression turned stone cold and pale.

Lady Maltese had a small smile on her face, a smile that had no place on her delicate features. The family was right. She was from the surface.

43.

“THIS CAN’T be true,” Lord Maltese said. “Please tell me it’s not true.”

“It’s true,” Lady Maltese said.

The lord gave a whimper and staggered back. Someone might have planted a blade in his ribs. He looked at Lady Maltese like he’d never seen her before. Perhaps he hadn’t, at least not the real her.

Lady Maltese shifted her speech pattern, what Zoe suspected was her true accent. She recognized it as somewhere on the upper east coast.

“My lady,” Lord Maltese said. “Why are you talking like that?”

“Because it’s my real voice, you fool,” Lady Maltese said. “Don’t you recognize truth when you hear it? I’m forgetting. Of course you don’t.”

The lord stumbled back again, as if struck by a fierce blow.

“I love you,” he said.

“That’s what happens when one casts the spell of infatuation upon another, is it not?” Lady Maltese said. “The irrational inability to see what’s right in front of their noses.”

“But… how?” Lord Maltese said.

“How could I outwit a simpleton such as yourself?” Lady Maltese said. “With great ease, as it turned out. How could I outwit the nitwits living in this town? With even greater ease. The real difficulty was trying not to lose my own wits in this place.”

The locals watched the scene like it was the climax to their favorite play. They were silent, gawping as the scene unfolded. The main players were the lord’s family, the most revered family in the whole town. To watch this play out was both fascinating and heartbreaking at the same time.

“But… why?” Lord Maltese said.

“Because on the surface, my whole life I’d been a nothing,” Lady Maltese said. “There’s no way I was going to let myself be a nothing down here too.”

“But you’re an engineer,” Lord Maltese said. “The things you can do… You could have been famous.”

“And still looked down on by my social superiors,” Lady Maltese said. “There is always somebody better. Never forget that. There is always somebody better to look down on you and sneer. I wasn’t going to put up with that any longer. I was going to be top dog down here, and no one was going to stop me from doing it. No one.”

“But how couldn’t someone recognize you for who you were?” Zoe said. “Someone would have noticed someone new turning up here. Just like they all knew we weren’t from here originally. Especially someone in your position—as a lady.”

“Which is why I had to be so careful,” Lady Maltese said. “The hardest part was getting that first job. Almost all work comes by reference. And so I had to befriend some of the locals, for them to assume who I was, who my family were. But that couldn’t last forever. I needed something more solid, more concrete if I was to climb the social ladder.

“But my story actually begins far from here, up on the surface. You can’t know what it is to want more than you have—really want more than you have—when you have nothing to begin with.

“You are right, I was an engineer on the surface. A good one, as it turns out. But I was nothing more. I wasn’t a wife, a mother, nor even a daughter after my parents were taken from me in a car crash the previous summer. I met men, but they used me and then became disinterested, wishing never to see me again. I was about ready to throw it all in, to toss myself off the building I was then working on. But there was a builder who spoke to me, talked me down. He smiled at me. A warm smile, and I was captivated by him.

“He took me to dinner, not at expensive restaurants—he couldn’t afford it, but I didn’t care for food anyway. I slept with him. And he was still there by the next morning. We saw each other often. And then, one day, he stopped calling me. I met him on the building site, but he was terse.

“I later found out the other builders knew about us, and he was embarrassed because I was his boss. I told him it didn’t matter to me, that only he mattered, that I loved him. But it didn’t matter. He’d already made up his mind. He wouldn’t see me again.

“I was so embarrassed. I thought he liked me. I felt a flash of anger then, not at myself, which was usually the case, but at him. I wanted to kill him, to stab him in the chest and tear out his heart just as he had torn out mine! It was the first, but certainly not the last, time I felt such powerful

emotions. I wanted the ground to swallow me up, and it did, though not right then.

“I was making my plans to gut him. I had my knife and I was going to blindly stab him in the chest while no one was around. I was going to tear him to pieces, but it wasn’t to be, as, the night I was waiting for him outside his local drinking hole, I stood in wait in the shadows, and just when I was going to make my move, I felt a sudden pang of guilt.

“Could I do this, I wondered. Could I take someone’s life? And I hesitated. But it did not change my mind. I could do this, and furthermore, I would do it. I would do it in a way that they would write about in the newspapers, and I didn’t even care if I was caught. But I never got to carry out that first act of vengeance. The ground opened up and swallowed me whole.

“I ended up here, in this backward world. I was depressed when I first arrived, not recognizing it for the opportunity it represented. I dug, using tools when I could, my hands when they broke. I was demented with desperation. I thought I’d been punished and sent to hell for what I was planning on carrying out. Then I realized just how much of an advantage it could prove to be someone from the future.

“I wiped out an entire family in order to fill that blank space of my backstory. I became Judy, the eldest daughter of a poor family on the outskirts of town, the only survivor of a savage attack. The town will remember the murder of the Moseleys. Ostracized and forgotten by this town, they provided me with the ideal opportunity to set myself up as a part of your town. I’ve always had a skill with accents, not that it ever proved more useful than a cheap party trick in the past. But now, finally, it might be of use.

“The townsfolk turned on each other, eventually finding the killer in the mad but harmless local Potty. He wasn’t guilty, of course, but he fit the roll of a savage killer easily enough, especially when I gave them the eyewitness testimony the prosecutors so desperately needed. And then it was a simple matter of hanging him. In my quieter moments I find myself thinking I saw the flash of realization in his eyes as the rope tightened. But of course, he was unable to speak, even without the rope around his neck.

“Potty was quite mad, useless to the town. He became like a mascot. I did everyone a favor—including the luckless Potty—by having him put down. And in his death, I was reborn. I was given the position of

chambermaid in the noble Marsh family's castle, who took pity on me. It matters little how lowly a position one holds at the beginning of a career, I find. It matters only how lofty a situation one ends up.

"And there was only one position I had my eye on: that of lady of the town. And I saw my opportunity in the ridiculous, but well-meaning clause that haunts every lord: that any member of the town may take the lord's position. But there was a catch, if one checks the small print. Anyone wishing to ascend must at least be married to a noble of sufficient rank. It was a wrinkle, but a minor one.

"I was struck with luck as I had a more than passing resemblance to the daughter of Lord Marsh. Even the young Lady Marsh noticed. She used me on several occasions to dress in her clothes and attend events as herself, events she had no interest at all in attending. She never knew she was lining the innards of her own coffin when she did that.

"I took full advantage of the situation and used the opportunity to practice my impression of the young lady, even going so far as to assume her mannerisms and speech patterns. She was more than thrilled with my performance, and even gave me pointers on how I might improve. I did not require her directions. I pretended to incorporate them in any case. It's remarkable how people see themselves in comparison to how others really see them, don't you think? It's always likely to be less flattering than one expects.

"And so, there I was, with the means and ability to take the young lady's position and social status. What is a young ambitious lady to do when so freely given the tools she requires to carry out her plans? The wealth and power I'd always desired were close at hand. The young lady met her end with the sharp business side of a shovel.

"A small, but tender funeral was held for the unfortunate Judy Moseley, the last of her name. She had lived more in the past year than she had the previous thirty. Now it was the young Lady Marsh's turn.

"My new adopted mother recognized something different about me, of course. She was born with more brains than her daughter. But she also recognized the need for someone to take her daughter's place, or else have to wait another generation and hope her daughter's offspring wouldn't be as dim as her own.

"Real change never comes from within. It comes from outside, from the ostracized, from the downtrodden. Because someone, eventually, rises up

and tells everyone what they don't want to hear, what they don't want to know. And sometimes they say it without even needing to open their mouths at all. The lady knew that. Though she never condoned it, she never punished me either.

"Next, I needed a partner. My surrogate mother introduced me to many men of noble birth and I found them all to be powdered boys, not men. The town would look to a man, a real man. He needed the appearance of a tough leader, even if he wasn't one. And he needn't be of high birth. I could now provide the required title. It took some convincing on my part for my new mother to accept, but eventually she acquiesced.

"I discovered my future husband in the stables. I'd know him for quite some time when I was a chambermaid, though we never conversed much. He was a hard worker, his silhouette chiseled, and I admit I felt more than a stirring of my loins whenever I looked upon him. Yes, it was partially for selfish reasons that I chose him. I bedded him to ensure he knew what he was doing between the sheets—the one requirement I needed of him.

"I decided to play the role of the shy girl who shows her true colors only in the bedroom. It was a stereotype, but as we all know, stereotypes exist for a reason. It worked like a charm. And when he began to come to me, at first creeping in through my window at night, I rationed out what I did to him, so he would always be thinking about what he would receive next time, and the next time, and the time after that, until eventually he was wrapped around my little finger tighter than a worm on a hook.

"Convinced he would do whatever I bid of him, I told him I loved him, that my heart was full of him and I needed to have him as my husband. He had his reservations, but he agreed. We were going to challenge the lord for control of this world, when I realized we would not have won the support we required if we wanted to overthrow it and bring it under our power.

"And it was then that he came, a dark angel. A cloaked figure, who promised me I could achieve everything I wanted, and more. He would provide me with the need for a new lord to arise, and in return, he wanted me to work on something for him. A piece of machinery. I agreed.

"The next day, we heard tales of a monster coming from the caves and snatching people in the middle of the night. And as time went by, it became clear: there really was a monster. And it was then that I realized what the cloaked figure had done.

“He said he would provide the town with a need to change our leadership, and that was exactly what he’d provided. I needed to upgrade the monster of course, but that was easy enough. The hardest part was fitting it to the great beast. But after some work, I finally figured that out too.”

“But the monster,” Bryan said. “How did you control it?”

“Anything can be taught to do anything,” Lady Maltese said. “A lion to dance, a baboon to sing, a snake to fly, so long as you give them the tools and enough will. Anything is capable of anything.”

“I can’t believe this,” Lord Maltese said. “I won’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” Lady Maltese said. “It’s the truth. I’m not the victim anymore.”

“Lady Maltese, please,” Lord Maltese said with a haunted expression on his face. “You’ve achieved so much down here with us. I’m proud of you, of everything you’ve done. You can come back to us, you can come back to me and our family. Everything will be all right again. Please.”

Lady Maltese reached for the lord’s outstretched hand, and then she turned and saw the expressions on the faces of the townsfolk. There was no way they were going to let her get away with what she’d done. The murders. The lies. The mayhem. She would be strung up and decapitated.

Shouting in the corridor snapped her from her reverie. Clacking noises like weapons striking the walls. What it could be, Bryan had no idea, but he knew it couldn’t be good.

“You’re right about me, of course,” Lady Maltese said. “But you made a grievous mistake when you brought all the people here today. Doing so meant you left only a small skeleton force on the walls to defend us. Or should I say my skeleton force?”

“Mother…” Abigail said. “Please. Take me with you.”

Lady Maltese’s resolve seemed to break, only for an instant, but it was there. And then it was gone, like dust in a strong wind. It may not have existed at all.

“You are no longer required,” Lady Maltese said. “You have served your purpose. Goodbye. And farewell.”

“Mother!” Abigail said. “No! Please!”

The doors to the great hall burst open, and skinny figures stepped into the light. The townspeople screamed. These things, like many other things of late, were not from this world.

44.

THE FIGURES stepped into the warm fuzzy light of the candles burning on the walls. The townsfolk took a collective step back and a deep breath in. The figures wore grins, many missing teeth. They held an amalgamation of weapons in their tight fists, chipped and worn, bloodied and dangerous already.

They were skeletons, with blinking red lights acting as their beating hearts. Bryan recognized them as the skeletons the dragon had stripped of their flesh and left to hang on the line. There had been dozens of them, Bryan recalled. And here they all were, reanimated and brought back to life.

One of the skeletons took a step forward, his bones rattling and making crunching noises. His movements were not smooth, but jerky and uncontrolled. He turned his head to one side and peered menacingly at the locals.

The locals reacted the only way any sane person would have: they screamed and scattered, running for the doors to either side of the room. They worked together to shift the heavy lumps of wood. But opening them was a mistake, as even more of the rattling skeleton soldiers stepped forth.

How had these things been reanimated and told to come here? Bryan thought. During Lady Maltese's whole monologue she had never mentioned she had an accomplice. And Bryan didn't believe she had one now. Which meant it must have been some kind of device on her person that allowed her to contact and control her undead soldiers of fortune.

Bryan looked Lady Maltese over. She was decked out in jewelry. It could have been anything she wore, anything could be used to control these undead characters. Bryan eyed her, watching her, to see if she touched any of the jewelry on her person.

Bryan ran for her. Lady Maltese leapt off the dais and landed amongst the people. She pressed at the amulet hanging from her neck. Bryan could see that by pressing the jewels on its surface they acted like rudimentary buttons.

"Someone stop her!" Bryan said.

Lady Maltese grinned. She turned and ran among the commoners, who seemed more afraid of her than the undead soldiers, pulling back. The former lady ran through them to a side door and out into the corridors where her skeleton warriors were arranged in uniform lines. The skeletons parted, making room for her to pass through, before closing the gap behind her.

The braver individuals among the locals stepped forward to engage her but they were too slow, pulling back and skidding to a stop before the skeleton warriors, who didn't budge an inch. The people needed a leader. Bryan turned to Lord Maltese.

The lord sat on the side of the dais with his head in his hands, his legs hanging over the side. He was broken and destroyed by his wife's revelation. He would be of no use to any escape attempt they made. Worse, he might be a hindrance. Bryan felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry," Roland said. "Despite all my mother has done, she would never allow the common folk to be hurt by these skeleton warriors of hers."

A reanimated corpse lurched forward and, armed with a wicked scimitar, sliced open the large belly of a thick-chested man. Roland removed his hand from Bryan's shoulder, clearly shocked.

"It appears she has fewer scruples than you thought," Bryan said.

Roland turned pale. Bryan gripped him by the shoulders.

"Your father is a broken wreck," Bryan said. "You have to take charge."

"Right," Roland said distantly. "Uh, what would you suggest we do?"

"Tell the people to grab armor, chairs, anything, and use them as weapons," Bryan said.

"Right," Roland said. "Good suggestion."

He straightened up and addressed the moaning locals, who were distraught at what faced them.

"As the eldest and only son of the great lord-" he said, his voice barely audible.

"Just hurry up and do it!" Cassie said. "Stop wasting time!"

She ran to a wall and pulled at a sword attached to a decorative display. It thunked to the floor, but was thankfully not just for display purposes. She tossed one sword to Roland and kept the other for herself. The rest of the family did likewise, grabbing at weapons held by suits of armor.

Roland looked at his sword and held it above his head.

“People!” he said. “Hear me! Today we face a demon more deadly and dangerous than anything we’ve ever faced before! You must fight if you wish to survive. The time for peace is over. We must vanquish these foes and send them back to hell where they belong!”

The locals pushed their chairs over and snapped the legs off. They turned to face the skeleton soldiers, homemade cudgels in hand. Others leapt onto the dining tables, kicking off the empty plates set for the evening meal.

The guards were slow in reacting, but now they were stepping up to the plate, facing the skeletons headon. They were afraid—their training certainly hadn’t prepared them for this—but they were ready to do what needed to be done. Their job was to protect, and that was precisely what they were going to do.

“Men!” Roland said. “Let’s send these bags of bones back to hell where they belong!”

He ran forward, his sword raised.

From that moment, all hell broke loose.

The skeleton soldiers moved in an awkward, disorienting manner. Their joints were loose and seemed to stretch farther than they were originally designed for. Their faces were terrifying, lit by the red pulsing glow in their chests.

But they lacked the training the guards had with their weapons. Whatever knowledge and skill the previous occupants of the bodies had before was no longer in their possession. They were no better with their weapons than the untrained locals were, but they had an advantage: they were not incapacitated with fear.

Bryan swung his cudgel at a skeleton, caving in its skull. The skeleton continued to swing with its chipped sword. Bryan ducked to avoid the blow. He kicked the skeleton with the sole of his boot.

The skeleton fell back, but it was up again in an instant, performing an odd movement that resulted in its feet returning to the floor first, then its shins, its knees and thigh bones, until it was standing upright.

“I feel like I’m in Simon and the Argonauts,” Bryan said.

“Simon and the what?” Cassie said, slashing at her own skeleton.

“Remind me to educate you on American culture when we get home,” Bryan said.

“If it looks something like them, you can keep it,” Cassie said.

Bryan swung his cudgel like Babe Ruth, knocking the creature's head from its shoulders. Its whole body rocked with the blow, its head flying through the air. It turned to face Bryan again, headless. But it didn't seem to make much difference to the skeleton. If you were as good without your head as with it, what was the point?

The skeleton lurched forward again, this time finding its way past Bryan's defenses, knocking Bryan to the floor. Bryan struggled to wriggle free. He pushed at the bones on top of him. It was not heavy, but difficult to maintain a grip.

The skeleton reached over to grab its chipped sword and raised it high above its head, its beeping red heart visible through its ribs. Bryan was too fearful to respond, and held his arms over his head. He was doomed.

But the blow never came. Instead, the skeleton's lifeless—and this time, really lifeless—body fell on top of Bryan.

A hand reached down and helped Bryan to his feet. The hand was small, but strong. It was ice cold, and for a moment Bryan wondered if perhaps he'd grabbed a skeleton's hand by mistake.

"You have to destroy their hearts," his rescuer said. "Or what passes for their heart. Tell me Bryan, were you one of these creatures once?"

"Rosetta?" Bryan said. "What are you doing here?"

45.

“I’M FINE thanks,” Rosetta said. “How are you?”

Bryan tentatively reached out and put his hands on Rosetta’s shoulders. He couldn’t believe it. She was real.

“Rosetta?” Bryan said.

“The one and only,” Rosetta said.

Bryan wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close.

“I can’t believe it’s really you!” he said. “For a minute there I thought I’d lost my mind. Are there more of you? Is there a rescue team down here?”

“There is a rescue team,” Rosetta said with a nod. “It’s the same underpaid, overworked rescue team you’ve always had. Me.”

“I’m so pleased to see you,” Bryan said. “But how did you get here?”

“Don’t dock my wages for insubordination,” Rosetta said, “but don’t you think we should worry about these undead fellows before having this discussion?”

“Of course,” Bryan said.

The locals looked at Rosetta uncertainly at first, gawping at her metal arm. They seemed unsure whether she was one of the monsters they were meant to be fighting or not. But once they saw her in action, tearing the undead apart, it soon became obvious whose side she was on.

Rosetta’s robot arm turned out to be just what they needed. It was the skeleton warriors’ Achilles’ Heel. Rosetta ran at the undead, blocking their attack with her metal arm before thrusting her hand into their chest cavities, grasping the blinking red box, and ripping it free.

She repeated the procedure over and over, the metal of her arm breaking the flimsy metal of the middle ages. She needed the support from the locals, and they were happy to give it to her, just as long as they didn’t need to be on the front line.

“That’s funny,” Rosetta said.

“What is?” Bryan said.

“Usually it’s me that’s getting my heart ripped out,” Rosetta said.

“Remind me to set you up with some of my friends when we get back,” Bryan said.

“They’re the ones I’m talking about,” Rosetta said.

“Then consider them unfriended,” Bryan said.

Thanks to Rosetta they were making good headway through the skeleton horde.

“You seem to have this sorted out,” Bryan said.

“You’re about to leave now, right?” Rosetta said. “As usual. Just when it’s starting to get interesting.”

“Can you hold the fort?” Bryan said. “And keep pushing the advantage?”

“There are still a whole lot of these beasties out there,” Rosetta said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Bryan smiled. Rosetta’s best was always more than enough.

“And Rosetta,” Bryan said.

“Huh?” Rosetta said.

“It’s great to see you,” Bryan said.

Rosetta grinned, before it evaporated into her customary scowl.

“Get out of here, you big softie,” she said, turning back to the skeleton horde. “These worlds have had a bad influence on you.”

You could accuse Rosetta of being many things, but being a softie was certainly not one of them.

46.

THE FAMILY came running out of the castle. There were two skeletons on their tail. They turned to deal with them, sending their bones sprawling across the steps.

“How are we going to stop all these monsters?” Zoe said. “The skeletons won’t stop. Not while they have power to move.”

“There must be an antennae,” Bryan said. “I saw Lady Maltese using some kind of device to control the skeletons. It must be what she uses to control the dinosaur too.”

“A what?” Cassie said.

“An antennae,” Bryan said. “For Lady Maltese’s device to send its signal. Without it she wouldn’t be able to tell them what to do.”

“Great,” Zoe said. “Except I’ve never seen an antennae here! And it would stand out in a town like this, don’t you think?”

“I’ve seen one,” Aaron said. “Or what might be one.”

“Where?” Bryan said.

“On the roof of the tallest tower in the castle—the inventor’s tower,” Aaron said.

Bryan turned to look at the statue of the dragon being vanquished by Saint George. It was an odd shape, and now that he looked at it, it did look a bit like an antennae with its protruding appendages.

“That’s it,” Bryan said.

“We’ll destroy it,” Cassie said, nodding to herself and Aaron.

“Will we?” Aaron said.

“We’ll destroy the antennae while you catch Lady Maltese,” Cassie said.

Aaron ran the two options through his mind. He knew which one was safest and the least likely to get him killed.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Zoe said. “We don’t even know where Lady Maltese is. She could be anywhere.”

Cassie shook her head and gave Zoe a friendly roll of her eyes.

“There can only be one place she could be,” Cassie said. “The one place the locals would never go, where she had a T-Rex defending all this time.”

“The caves,” Zoe said.

Cassie and Aaron turned and ran toward the inventor’s tower. Bryan watched them with pride.

“You have to admit, we did a great job in raising them,” he said.

“I’ll certainly agree with that,” Zoe said. “Even if they are a handful at times.”

“Looks like a handful is what we need,” Bryan said

He was looking at the smoldering remains of the town’s west wall. Whatever was on the other side could breathe white-hot fire. The wall wouldn’t last much longer.

“It looks like we’re about to get a whole much of handfuls as we speak,” Zoe said.

The creature’s bright green crest was visible over the wall. A giant eye peered through an arrow slit. If Bryan hadn’t know better, he would have said the monster was smiling at him. It took a step back, threw its weight against the wall that was already leaning dangerously inward, before finally giving up the ghost and falling forward.

47.

CASSIE AND AARON ascended the spiral staircase in record time. It was a good thing it was them who had to run up the stairs, as Cassie was sure Bryan would have died before making it to the top.

She really needed to get him to join a gym when they got back to the surface. Aaron, on the other hand, must have developed a few muscles during their adventure beneath the surface. If he kept it up she was sure he could perform very well in sports at school.

They got to the top. Cassie's eyes immediately went to the spot on the floor where they had found the inventor's dead body. It was gone now, and every attempt had been made to scrub the blood stains from the stone, but the cleaners had failed. The stains were faint, but still there.

She tore her eyes away and surveyed the room, rising to the ceiling. They needed to get on the roof somehow, so they might destroy the antennae.

But how?

Cassie searched amongst the detritus and half-built inventions. She came out with a length of rope.

"What are you doing?" Aaron said.

"Fancy a trip up Memory Lane?" Cassie said.

"Not really," Aaron said.

"Tough," Cassie said. "We're going to relive our time in the magma world and climbing from the nest. But instead of climbing down, we'll be climbing up."

"Goodie," Aaron said, shoulders slumping.

48.

BRYAN HAD been in situations like this before: knowing what needed to be done, but having no idea how they were meant to carry it out. Admittedly those times never featured a giant reptile that was meant to be extinct, although Mr. Myers, a former business partner, did have traits similar to the great king of the dinosaurs. They needed to get it away from the town, but they had no plan.

“We’ll never outrun it,” Zoe said.

“So what?” Bryan said. “Just leave it here. We only need to get into the caves and find the Passage. Then we can get out of here.”

“While the kids are still in the town, in the tallest tower?” Zoe said.

“Good point,” Bryan said. “What do you suggest we do?”

Neigh!

It was a nervous chattering sound, punctuated with solid thumps on a thick door.

“The horses,” Zoe said.

They ran to the castle’s stables and found the horses inside. They were stirring, nervous with the approaching monster.

“We should let them out, don’t you think?” Bryan said.

“We’ll lead the dinosaur away so it won’t bother these horses anymore,” Zoe said. “We just need two horses. Let’s see…”

She moved along the line and found what she considered to be the two best horses in the stables. She opened the stable door and put her hands to the first horse, a large black stallion. Lord Maltese’s own horse. She calmed him down. He grunted against her hands, but soon quietened. Zoe led him out of the stable and put his saddle on.

“You take him,” Zoe said.

She prepared a beautiful brown gelding for herself—the same she’d ridden several times already. It was calm at the sight of her. She climbed on.

“Now what?” Bryan said.

“Now we lead the dinosaur away,” Zoe said.

“How?” Bryan said.

“You’ll get its attention first and lead it out of town,” Zoe said. “I’ll head out now, close to the woodland where we first entered when we got here. By the time you get to me, I’ll be rested and ready to run. Then the dinosaur will chase me.”

“Like a relay race,” Bryan said. “But what do we do with the dinosaur in the end? We can’t just get it to chase us all the time.”

“We won’t need to,” Zoe said. “Is your trap still set up from when you tried to capture it before?”

“Yes,” Bryan said.

“Then that’s what we’ll lead him toward,” Zoe said. “He’ll spring the trap, and he’ll be caught.”

“Wait,” Bryan said. “I just thought of something.”

“I guessed that at your exclamation of ‘Wait’,” Zoe said. “What is it?”

“What makes you think the dinosaur will even chase me?” Bryan said. “There’s plenty around here for him to eat.”

Zoe had the audacity to smile.

“Because a predator never forgets prey that escaped him,” she said.

Bryan thought back to the crazy, near-mad look on the dinosaur’s face when the family had made it to the town. It had been murderous…

And now Bryan was about to put himself on the menu.

Zoe kissed Bryan on the lips.

“See you in a bit,” she said. “Be careful.”

She smacked her gelding’s rump and they shot forward into the street. She took a hard left, in the opposite direction to where the dinosaur was.

“Be careful!” Bryan said.

He shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“That’s a laugh,” he said.

49.

AARON COMPLAINED, but there was little he could do. They needed to get to the top of the roof, and besides climbing up and destroying it by hand, there was no other way of doing it. Luckily, Aaron was on board. He was the one with all the ideas.

Aaron surveyed the equipment and half-built inventions lying on the floor and strewn across the tables. Piles of items in various stages of the creative process.

Aaron snapped off some of these pieces, and attached it to another piece, before winding it all off with the thick wire and rope. He worked on autopilot, having already memorized where all the pieces were.

I have got *to get my memory into better shape*, Cassie thought. But that was an idea for later. If there was a later. First she needed to get to the roof. Now was her time to shine.

Aaron handed what he'd made to Cassie. She was the sporty person, the action hero. She looked at what he'd handed her. It was a length of rope with a long stick threaded sideways.

"What's this for?" Cassie said. "It looks like something a trapeze artist would use."

"It's for you to throw over the tower," Aaron said. "It's wide so it's easier for me to catch, and I can brace it on this side of the window in case you fall."

"Got all bases covered I see," Cassie said.

"You never know," Aaron said.

Cassie approached the window, while Aaron crossed to the opposite side.

"Ready?" Cassie said, holding the stick in one hand and the length of rope in the other.

"Wait," Aaron said.

He cast about and identified what he was looking for: a large net that reminded Cassie of a dreamcatcher. Aaron snapped it off and moved toward the opposite window, holding the net outside.

"Okay," he said, nodding to Cassie.

“Here we go,” Cassie said.

She would throw it too high, she decided. It was better to get it over the roof than to get it stuck on something. She stood on the window’s ledge, bracing herself with the hand holding the coil of rope. She moved her arm up and down, judging the distance and how hard she needed to throw the object.

She pulled her arm back and released the stick. It looped up high, as high as Cassie had been able to throw it, but she knew the moment it had left her hand that the angle was off.

“It’s not going to come down directly at you,” Cassie said. “Sorry.”

“Which side do you think it will come down at?” Aaron said, looking out of the window and trying to see where the stick was.

“On your right,” Cassie said.

Aaron held his net out, preparing to catch the weight. There was a thud on the roof, and then a sliding sound like something was skidding across the roof tiles. A few of the tiles came loose and fell into Aaron’s net, passing through the gaps and falling to the ground below. Cassie hoped the holes wouldn’t let the stick pass through too.

Cassie’s rope had ceased unspooling. The stick was up on the roof somewhere. And then it began unwinding again. That was a relief. She would have had to have pulled the rope back and tried again.

“Here it comes!” Cassie said.

Aaron had to lean over at an extreme angle out of the window in order to be within reach of it, utilizing his legs as placeholders. The weight tried to drag him over, but he held on and pulled back.

“Got it?” Cassie said.

Aaron grunted, not saying a word. He gradually pulled himself back inside, inch by inch. Cassie wanted to dash forward to help him, but doing so meant letting go of the rope she held in her hands. She couldn’t risk losing it.

Aaron pulled himself back inside and held the stick in his hands.

“I’ve got it,” he said, mildly out of breath.

Aaron turned the stick sideways so it was supported on both sides of the window. He picked up more sticks and wound them around the rope, securing it and making it stronger. It was a load-bearing weight and could easily take Cassie’s weight.

“Well, here we go,” Cassie said.

She gripped the rope and was about to climb when Aaron picked up a length of wood—what look like the leg of a polished coffee table—and handed it to her.

“What’s this for?” Cassie said.

“You didn’t intend on smashing the antennae with your hands, did you?” Aaron said.

“Good point,” Cassie said.

She took the makeshift cudgel and attached it to her belt. She turned to the rope and began to pull herself up. After the adventure in the snake’s nest, her muscles had grown strong. She reached up and pulled herself onto the roof with ease.

Now she was on the roof, the antennae—if that was what it was—was within swinging distance. She crouched to lower her center of gravity and edged toward the statue. It was a beautiful thing. It seemed a shame to smash it to pieces. But that was what had to be done. She raised her weapon to begin her reign of destruction.

SMASH!

It hadn’t come from Cassie swinging her weapon, but behind her. Something had caused a great deal more damage to a building on the other side of the castle wall than Cassie could do over the course of weeks, and it had done it in seconds. She stood frozen, her arm raised, and slowly turned to look out the corner of her eye at the creature behind her.

It was the T-Rex. And Cassie was at perfect chomping height.

Cassie froze. If the dinosaur turned it might catch her scent. And she would be doomed. She stood there, legs shaking, frozen in position. She was in a low squat position, body bent double under the pressure and weight of her own body. It was the worst possible position to be in. The sweat dripped down her face.

There was a whinnying sound on Cassie’s right, down on the street.

No, Cassie thought, and would have screamed if she wasn’t right at the dinosaur’s ear. The dinosaur straightened up, even closer to her position now, and looked down at the lone horseman.

Cassie could smell the monster’s reeking breath. She turned her head to look away, to block the stench, but she daren’t turn too far or fast for fear of getting the beast’s attention. The dinosaur growled in the back of its throat. The growl of something hungry, and not just for food, but for vengeance.

Cassie felt relieved. Whoever the lone warrior was, he had just saved not only her and Aaron’s life, for the monster would have surely brought the entire tower down, but he would have also torn through the great hall, pulverizing the locals to mush.

Her heart lurched in her throat as the dinosaur gave chase to the rider. The awkward angle of the rider caught her eye. He was no hero from the fairytales. He was a hero from real life.

He was her father.

50.

BRYAN COULDN’T recall feeling so scared his whole life. But then again, he’d felt like that often these days. He dreaded to think the grey hairs this whole experience would give him.

He was playing chicken with a dinosaur, and not just any dinosaur, but the most feared and terrible dinosaur in the history of the world. The T-Rex. The one all dinosaurs feared. And he was facing him on a horse, making himself an even more delicious target.

When Bryan had emerged onto the street, in full view of the dinosaur at the opposite end, it had been busying itself with smashing a clutch of homes to pieces. It breathed on the rubble, melting it to molten lava-like flows. It pressed its weight on top of the rubble with its giant feet, crushing it. It seemed to find enjoyment in doing it.

Thankfully no one was inside the house. They were all inside the great hall. They were still fighting for their lives, but what chance would they have had against this giant mass of muscle?

Probably about the same as me, Bryan thought.

Bryan’s horse was skittish. Bryan couldn’t blame it. He was scared too. But they were a healthy distance away. The horse was well trained and obeyed Bryan’s commands even when he told it to stand its ground.

He needed to make a noise, any loud noise, to get the dinosaur’s attention. But what? He cast around, looking for something to beat on a wall. But it would mean getting off the horse. Get off, and he might never get back on again.

The solution was obvious. He pulled on the horse’s reins, drawing it up into a rearing pose. It expelled a loud whinny.

The dinosaur turned to face the noise, face him. The dinosaur locked eyes on him. It grunted, and Bryan thought he recognized him. His insides turned to water. The monster lowered its head, and its eyes became slits. It drew its leg back and forth, stroking the earth, like a bull before it pounced. Bryan didn’t need so many obvious signals, but he took heed of them in any case.

He turned the horse around and galloped. The dinosaur roared, the thud of its heavy footsteps a reminder of how close the dinosaur was. It was fast and kept pace with the horse. Bryan was surprised. He had no idea how fast a T-Rex was, and in hindsight, that seemed an obvious problem they should have thought of before. After all, if a T-Rex was too fast, how could they expect to outrun it?

And it was too fast. It was gaining.

The rumble of its feet on the hard packed dirt roads was thunder in Bryan's ears. Bryan shivered. He rocked his body back and forth, having to push the horse faster than he expected. It was no good.

He couldn't outrun the beast in a straight line, and though the exit beckoned to him just ahead, he knew he wouldn't make it, at least, not in a single piece. He pulled sharply on the reins and steered the horse left, around a corner and onto a side street.

It would buy him some time, he hoped, and with any luck-

The large house on the corner exploded like it had been set off with dynamite. Amidst the flying rubble and dust, a huge pair of muscular legs pumped hard, green and bleeding across its giant knees.

The dinosaur wasn't smiling, of course—Bryan wasn't even sure if a such a creature was capable of smiling—but to Bryan's eyes that was exactly what it was doing.

Bryan focused on the task in hand. He needed to double back on himself, head back toward the entrance, but he daren't turn left with the monster right on his heels.

But he couldn't afford to waste time either. Who knew how long a horse lasted running at this pace? He decided to take the risk. He shut his eyes and said a quick prayer.

He led his horse down a narrow alley, and then, once inside, took another immediate left. The building to his left exploded, the shards rapping against him, shards as big as his head. He raised his elbow to protect himself. The horse whinnied and shifted to the right.

A huge head came out of the destroyed building like a wraith, its tongue lashing like a whip toward Bryan, but he didn't slow. He didn't dare. He felt the slime on the tip of its tongue slide across his cheek.

A large green snake, similar in size to a fallen tree, came rushing toward him. It was the creature's tail, of course. Bryan reacted the same way whether it was a snake, tree or tail, and took the horse over it with a

prowess of skill he didn’t know he had. He pushed the horse on. He was home free!

He got to the end of the alleyway and entered the main street. He turned right, heading toward the open gates. This part of town was silent. Bryan feared, as he always did, that an impediment would emerge at any moment, blocking him off and making it impossible for him to pass.

But it didn’t happen. He passed through the gate. He allowed the horse to slow, but he didn’t stop till he was a reasonable distance from the gate on a flat grassy plain.

Bryan leaned forward and slapped the horse comfortingly on the neck. It was covered in sweat, steam rising off it, nostrils flared, its breath hoarse.

Bryan turned his head to the side to listen for heavy footfalls, but heard none. There was no sign of the lumbering beast. That didn’t mean the creature wasn’t there, stalking, waiting for Bryan to come back through the gates. The monster had already proven he was a smart and thoughtful hunter.

The horse’s footfalls were loud and heavy on the drawbridge. It was a welcoming sound, the sound of freedom. Bryan crossed to the other side of the moat and turned the horse around.

The gates stood empty. There were no loud thudding footsteps, no growls or roars. Where was the beast? Dare he head back to see if it was there? He needed to make sure it followed him. But was the monster now setting his own trap by drawing Bryan to him?

Bryan had no choice. He had to go back.

51.

DESPITE ALL Lady Maltese's knowledge, there were certain things she simply could not reproduce with the level of technology at her disposal. High technology required the investment and development from thousands of individuals, not just one. No matter how brilliant that one person might be, there was no way she could replicate the level of technology the surface had.

But she could try. And she had.

She wanted to build a camera to attach to the top of the T-Rex's head for better control. For what could be bought for a few dollars in any store on the surface you couldn't even dream of reproducing in this world.

She could hear the roar of her beloved Rexy. She had learned over the years to read her pet's agonized groans, the way its roar soared or fell, its delicate intonation. It couldn't be described as a language, but it did convey meaning. In many ways, vocal communication was better than a camera. She recognized a cry of disappointment when she heard one.

It could only mean Rexy had failed to snap up one of the family members. Rexy was like that. He didn't like to lose what he felt belonged to him. He was highly territorial.

The former Lady Maltese decided to give her pet a gift, as part of her latest upgrade. She picked up her amulet and pressed the big ruby button. At least there were some things she was still capable of reproducing in this world. She grinned, chuckled with a half maniacal grin, and then turned and ran into the caves.

52.

THE SKELETAL warriors were not difficult to engage, but they were difficult to kill. They were unlike anything Rosetta had ever fought before. Removing your opponent’s head tended to put a dampener on their attack, but with the skeletons it didn’t make any difference.

That was why she didn’t bother to decapitate them or slice through their limbs any longer—they would only keep attacking anyway, and judging by the number of dead and injured locals on the floor, that was precisely what had happened. They’d sliced off an undead’s head, only for it to then continue at them. In their shock the skeletons had the perfect opportunity to strike their enemies down.

Too many locals had fallen to the skeletons, and Rosetta was not about to let more die than need be. She thrust her metal arm into every rotting chest cavity she came to, and tore out their beating mechanical hearts.

But they were fighting a losing battle. For every skeleton they killed, another two were ready to take its place. Their only saving grace was the limited width of the great hall, otherwise the skeletons would have surrounded them and hacked them to pieces.

Despite everything Rosetta had been through, despite finally finding Bryan and his family, she had managed to speak just a few words with him. Now she was about to die here, in what looked like the Hogwart’s dining room.

53.

IT WAS just then, a moment too late, after Lady Maltese had pressed her ruby button that Cassie brought her cudgel down for the antennae's killing blow. The George and dragon statue slid off the roof and clattered to the stony ground, flipping end over end.

The skeletal soldiers stood stock still for a moment before collapsing on the ground, in a pile. The townspeople began emerging from the great hall almost immediately afterwards. One sported a robot arm. Rosetta. She blinked into the light.

Cassie began to lower herself back down using the rope. She got to the window, Aaron ready to help her back inside. It wasn't a few seconds later when there was a great roar somewhere to the west of the city.

This roar wasn't of fury or desperation, but of pain, Cassie thought. Then there was a great creaking and buffeting noise, like someone was waving a huge fan. Cassie thought she caught sight of a shadow rising into the clouds, but it was gone just as soon as she turned toward it. She let the image of the rising shadow enter her mind. She played it over and over, trying to work out its features.

"What?" Aaron said. "What is it?"

"We have to get out of here," Cassie said, her voice haunted. "Nowhere is safe."

54.

BRYAN APPROACHED the gates cautiously, his stallion’s hooves clip clopping on the drawbridge. The gate was big, built to be impressive, but did not provide the best view of what lay inside.

The dinosaur could have been right around the corner and he wouldn’t have known. If it came at full tilt Bryan wasn’t sure he’d be able to get his horse to run fast enough in the opposite direction, and so he approached slowly.

He leaned forward, hands clasped tight around the reins, and peered around the corner. He felt relieved when he found nothing there but empty streets in either direction. He felt nervous. If it hadn’t chased him, where had it gone? To the castle? To the great hall? To the inventor’s tower?

Bryan eased off the reins to lead the horse into a gallop. When he stopped, he heard a loud fluttering noise like an old airplane’s rotor blades warming up. It was getting closer. Bryan was growing nervous, his horse skittish. He didn’t blame it. He didn’t like it either.

“Woah there, boy,” Bryan said, slapping it reassuringly on the neck.

The horse did not relax. It whinnied and backed up. Something was spooking him. He reared up onto his powerful back legs and it was then, with his eyes rising to the sky, that Bryan saw what the horse must have sensed.

A dark shadow descended from the protection of the thick mist-like clouds, a pair of enormous flapping shadows on either side of it.

Bryan’s heart froze in his chest, eyes as wide as dinner plates.

They hadn’t thought of this. How could they? They didn’t know the beast could fly. They had mistaken the metal box on its back for a shield, but it wasn’t a shield. It was an extendable pair of wings. Their plan now seemed ridiculously naive. Things had just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

The T-Rex fell the final twenty feet, tucking its wings behind itself, and hit the ground, making it shake, like thunder. It took the full force with its two powerful hind legs. Its wings were huge and arched, having opened up from what they had previously mistaken for body armor.

The dinosaur threw back its head and let out a roar that would have sent a pride of lions packing. It glared at Bryan, licked its lips with a badly blistered tongue, the smoldering fire within already red hot.

55.

WHERE HAD Bryan gotten to? He was meant to bring the dinosaur to her so she could continue leading it to the trap, where it would eat, get caught, and they could deal with it later.

It also meant the kids and Rosetta—speaking of whom, how in God's name had she managed to get there by herself?—would be able to join them in the caves so they could search for the Passage and get out of there.

By then, they would have done more than enough to help the locals of this town, to whom they owed no particular loyalty. In fact, they had probably done more than the locals deserved. They had treated the family with suspicion the whole time they were here, and blamed them for everything that had gone wrong.

Despite the creature comforts, Zoe couldn't wait to leave this place. It was too small minded and set in its ways. Zoe wasn't exactly 'normal' (whatever that meant) on the surface. She did not believe everything she read in the newspapers, and did not subscribe to widely held beliefs because, as history had shown, whatever the majority of people agreed on and thought was correct, was almost always wrong.

Where had that man gotten to? Zoe thought. He should have been there by now. More than a finger of concern had wormed its way into her heart. There were too many things that could have happened. Zoe refused to give any of them time nor credence. She would know what happened when she knew. There was nothing she could do if something had happened in any case, and she couldn't leave where she was camped now for fear Bryan would eventually turn up.

She heard the familiar soft clip clopping noise of horse hooves coming toward her.

"It's about time!" Zoe said.

But the irritation died on her lips when she saw the horrified expression on Bryan's face.

56.

“WHAT DID you see?” Aaron said.

Cassie had been silent ever since she came down from the roof, having destroyed the antennae. Despite Aaron’s repeated enquiries, she hadn’t yet responded to his question.

“We have to get out of here,” Aaron said. “Mother and Bryan will be waiting for us at the caves.”

Cassie shook her head.

“No,” she said. “They won’t. They’ll be dead.”

“What are you talking about?” Aaron said.

“The T-Rex,” Cassie said. “It really is a dragon. It has wings. It can fly. And it breathes fire. It’s a dragon.”

“It can fly?” Aaron said.

He took a seat, suddenly feeling light headed.

“Yes,” he said. “That changes things.”

“We’ll never get to the caves while that thing is flying overhead,” Cassie said. “It’ll burn us to a crisp before we even get to it.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Aaron said. “We can’t just sit here. It’s going to come back and get us eventually. Especially with all the dead bodies and the locals in the great hall. What are we going to do?”

“I’m thinking,” Cassie said.

Footsteps came running up the spiral staircase.

“Kids, we have to go find your parents,” Rosetta said.

“No,” Cassie said. “We have to do more than that. We have to save them.”

“From the dragon?” Rosetta said. “How?”

Aaron was looking at Jeffrey’s stash of inventions. There was a pile of weapons on the table beside a stack of white backpacks.

“I have an idea,” Aaron said.

57.

THIS WHOLE time Bryan had been working diligently to get the dinosaur to follow him so they might trap it, when the whole time the dinosaur had a secret on its back, and now they found themselves on the backfoot.

Bryan ran the horse hard, and when the dragon disappeared into the thick clouds overhead, Bryan had no choice but to rush into the forest, to hide himself as best he could. He changed direction and headed right, running through the forest closest to the town walls, but far enough inside the woods that the dragon would not see him from above.

The dragon came out of the sky like the harbinger of death, and breathed a hot bolt of flame that fell upon the forest, scoring a line through it. Burnt woodland and charcoal filled Bryan's nostrils. He never stopped, and only pushed the horse harder.

The woodland would catch fast, and there would be nothing for it but to break cover. The moment Bryan did that, the dragon would be on him. The dragon held all the cards.

Bryan saw Zoe the moment he ascended a steep hill. She was waiting for him on the other side.

"It's about time!" Zoe said.

Her expression changed the moment she laid eyes on him.

"What is it?" she said.

The trees burned and crackled in Bryan's wake, working its way up the incline.

"You started a fire?" Zoe said. "What did you think that would achieve?"

"It might keep us warm," Bryan said. "I didn't start it. Our reptile friend did."

"What are you even doing in the woods anyway?" Zoe said. "You should have steered clear of it, working your way around to the front, and then entering so I could come out."

There was a roar overhead, and a black shadow flitted behind the clouds.

"Oh," Zoe said.

They turned their mounts and trotted through the forest, keeping a step ahead of the fire.

“This is great,” Zoe said. “Since when could it fly?”

“All along, apparently,” Bryan said. “That was what the metal armor on its back was for. To unfold once the right button was pressed.”

“So the antennae is still working too,” Zoe said.

“Apparently,” Bryan said. “Though the dinosaur never attacked the inventor’s tower. He came close though.”

“At least we know the kids are okay,” Zoe said. “And they’re far from all this.”

A bell rang, high pitched and clanging.

“What’s that?” Bryan said.

“It’s the church bell,” Zoe said. “It’s ringing.”

“It’s a bit late,” Bryan said. “The town has been half destroyed by hordes of skeletons and a fire breathing T-Rex with wings.”

“Maybe it’s not a warning bell,” Zoe said.

“What do you mean?” Bryan said. “What else could it be?”

Zoe rode forward, in the direction of the town.

“You’re going the wrong way!” Bryan said.

Zoe didn’t stop. Bryan trotted after her. Zoe pulled up on the fringes of the woodland. She squinted at the church bell tower in an effort to see clearer.

“Someone’s up there,” Zoe said.

“Of course someone’s up there,” Bryan said. “The bell is ringing.”

“No one needs to be on the roof to ring the bell,” Zoe said. “That’s what the bell ropes are for. They’re setting something up.”

“What do you think it could be?” Bryan said.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Zoe said. “But we’d best hope it’s something that’ll work. Our plan is a failure.”

The fire *woof*ed. It was really tearing through the forest now. They didn’t have long to make a decision.

“The dragon is expecting us to race across the plain toward the caves,” Zoe said. “It’s the only place where he can’t reach or hurt us. The monster might not know much, but it knows that.”

“Yes,” Bryan said, though he didn’t look much enthused by the idea. “I suppose we’d better head back into town. I just hope we can make it back.”

“By ringing the bell, they’re hoping to get the dragon’s attention,” Zoe said. “But it won’t leave here till it has us. It knows it has us on the ropes.”

“I sure hope whoever is on the roof of the church knows what they’re doing,” Bryan said.

58.

“WHAT ARE we doing?” Cassie said. “We must be crazy to attempt something like this.”

“It’s the only shot we’ve got,” Aaron said.

“Speaking of shots, one is about all we’ll have,” Cassie said. “As soon as that thing is above us, it’ll blast us with its breath and there will be no chance we’ll escape. We’ll have to be up here to fire the net too. We’ll need a way to get down quickly.”

“Don’t worry,” Aaron said. “I’ve got us covered.”

“So let me get this right,” Rosetta said. “You’re ringing this bell to get the dragon’s attention. When it comes in close to investigate, you’re going to fire your giant crossbow and try to knock it out of the sky. And we will probably only have one shot because the dragon will hit us with its fire breath as soon as it knows we’re here.”

“That’s about it, yeah,” Aaron said.

“And this is the best idea we have?” Rosetta said.

“Pretty much, yes,” Aaron said.

Rosetta thought for a moment.

“Okay,” she said. “At least it’ll make one hell of a eulogy.”

“If we fail, there won’t be any eulogies for anybody,” Aaron said.

“Way to increase the pressure,” Rosetta said, rolling her eyes. “If we fail, everyone in this world is dead. Have I got that about right?”

“Spot on,” Cassie said.

“And to think last week I was worried about my quarterly review,” Rosetta said.

She bent down to pick up the giant crossbow.

“Where do you want this?” she said.

“Right here is fine,” Aaron said.

Rosetta braced herself against the wall and used her robot arm to move the giant crossbow frame. It was pointed in the direction of the forest, now a burning blaze, at the dragon that continued to rain fire down on the woodland.

Rosetta hoped Bryan and Zoe were okay. If they were in the caves, they were safe.

“Will this kill it?” Rosetta said.

“We don’t need to kill it,” Aaron said. “We just need to knock it out of the sky.”

59.

THE MOMENT their horses shot from the safety of the smoldering forest, a roar erupted from the dragon as it circled around and took off into the clouds for cover. There was perhaps a minute of uninterrupted silence before the rattling of metal wings above, and the scream of a haggard shard of metal that caught the wind and made it howl.

The town entrance was getting larger in their vision, the drawbridge drawing up close. The horses seemed to understand the situation and were giving it everything they had, a thick white liquid foaming up on their bodies.

“We’re not going to make it!” Bryan said.

“Yes we will!” Zoe said. “Keep going!”

The dinosaur roared, deafening. It must have been right on top of them. Any moment those roars would turn into the roars of fire, blasting them to charred smithereens.

The horses’ hooves thudded on the drawbridge. The riders pulled on their reins, turning the horses hard left. The wood splintered as the fire blasted through it, cutting a sharp line in the dirt road, narrowly missing the riders by inches.

The dragon had to pull up and make a U-turn to head back toward the riders, who were already hustling through the streets toward the church.

High above them, getting into position, was Rosetta, Aaron and Cassie, preparing to take a single shot that would either save them, or destroy them.

60.

“HE’S COMING,” Aaron said, spying the large black shape coming toward them.

“What makes you think it’s a him?” Rosetta said. “It could just as easily be female.”

“Sexist pig,” Cassie said with a wink at Rosetta.

Aaron blushed red. Rosetta’s plan was to get their minds off the task in hand as much as possible. People always performed better when they weren’t focused entirely on the task in hand.

It was one of the most valuable lessons Rosetta had learned in the military, to absorb and soak in as much information as possible, and then to let go, for the unconscious mind to take over. It was a supercomputer, and one of the ways to engage it was to let all tension and stress go, for the mind to take possession of the body. It was as much for herself as it was for the kids. She needed to relax.

What I wouldn’t give for a nice hot bath and some delicious red wine right about now, Rosetta thought.

That thought alone helped her to relax. She felt the muscles around her shoulders unwind. There had been no time to fashion a trigger. Instead, she wielded a hatchet. She would sever the rope and send the net they had locked and loaded spiraling out into the sky toward the large flapping monster.

It was going to be a tough shot. Fire too early and the monster would see it coming and avoid it. Worse, it would be a smaller target and harder to hit. Fire too late, and the net would have less effect, not having the time to unfurl and trap the monster.

She needed to be patient. She would prefer for the monster to be too close than too far away. At least then she might hit it and have some effect, rather than none at all.

Rosetta got to her feet and squinted at a pair of dust clouds rising, tearing up a trail leading toward the church.

“It’s them,” Rosetta said.

“Who?” Aaron said.

“Your parents,” Rosetta said.

They were coming right for the church, bringing the dragon toward them. The dragon had eyes only for them, and swooped in above the houses, barely pulling its legs up out of the way as it passed over the roofs. It was coming in low and fast, its chest already puffing up to expel fire.

The two horses were in the firing line, the dragon coming up behind them. No way they were going to escape. Bryan and Zoe were putting all their eggs in one basket with this maneuver, putting their lives in their hands. In Rosetta, Cassie and Aaron’s hands.

That really *lessens the tension*, Rosetta thought. *If I shoot and miss, I’ve just made Aaron and Cassie orphans.*

Rosetta’s hand felt sweaty on the hatchet handle. She gripped it tighter. The dragon’s head pulled back.

The horses were giving it all they had, fighting a losing battle, Zoe and Bryan’s arms working the horses’ heads hard.

Rosetta raised her axe high and…

Swung it down.

She couldn’t say she was ‘at one’ with the axe, but they had aimed the crossbow as best they could. The axe’s sharpened edge sliced through the rope in one smooth motion. The rope shot forward, sending the net package out, spiraling through the air.

The fire rumbled in the dragon’s mouth. It must have heard or seen the net because at the last moment it looked up. It grunted as the net, having unwound to its full width and height, snapped around the dinosaur.

“Yes!” Rosetta said.

The net couldn’t snap the wings together like it did the monster’s legs, but it did hold them in place, freezing them. Aaron and Cassie cheered, arms held up in celebration.

And then Aaron lowered his arms, his smile fading.

Rosetta turned to look at what had dampened his spirit.

Before losing its ability to fly, the dragon had been accelerating fast. Its hefty weight was still carrying it forward, its wings, unable to move, worked as a glider.

It was going to strike the ground, but not before it hit the church tower.

61.

ZOE AND BRYAN pulled hard on their reins, each taking a different direction. They'd been aware the dragon was close, but they were also aware that whatever weapon was atop the church tower, it had to be something Cassie and Aaron were confident would take the dragon down.

Their horses were shot and couldn't run much farther. The foam on their bodies was thick like frothing shampoo gel. They brought their loyal steeds to a slow stop, and didn't turn back to look at what the dragon's fate had been until they heard the cacophonous smash of the dragon as it sailed into the ground.

What gripped both the parents' hearts was the gentle tinkle of the church bell as it was knocked off its stand and fell to earth.

They rounded the corner, appearing back on the main street. They climbed from their horses and let them go. The horses took off at a canter, not wanting to be part of the adventure any longer.

Bryan and Zoe ran along the street. The dust was still settling and hung thickly over the scene like a shroud. As it began to clear, they made out a long indentation in the road where the dinosaur had fallen, its body tearing up a deep trench.

And then they came to the prostrate dinosaur body, the net tight and making deep furrows in its thick flesh.

There was a large empty space where the church should have been. Where the kids should have been.

The dragon was not dead, and grunted under its heavy restraints, the netting keeping its mouth shut. Its eyes found Bryan and Zoe and focused on them.

There was a real intense hatred in those eyes. It wanted them, wanted them with every fiber of its being. It tried to spit fire, but its lips couldn't open wide enough. Smoke whispered from its nostrils.

The parents moved around the monster, carefully placing their feet. They didn't want to come within range of the great reptile. It was still dangerous. A single thrash of its tail could spell the end of them. Just as it had been the end of the kids.

There was nothing but rubble left of the church. The bell had a crack in it, and the ancient stonework had been destroyed.

“We failed,” Zoe said. “We saved the town, but failed to save our kids. We failed them.”

Bryan hugged Zoe close. It was so painful a loss he couldn’t bear to even look at Zoe right then. They hugged one another, tears streaming down their faces. They had lost them. After all this time, there was nothing they could do to keep hold of them, to keep them from death’s jaws.

There was a fluttering sound. It could have been an angel’s wings. Zoe and Bryan spun around to look at the T-Rex. Had it gotten itself free, and was now working on getting itself airborne again? But no. It was still in the sorry state it had been when it had crash landed.

Their attention moved to the sound above their heads. And there it was. The cause. Three of them. They were descending on clouds of white, all three of the surfacers: Aaron, Cassie and Rosetta. They touched down heavily to the rubble. Zoe and Bryan were on hand to help them to their feet.

“I thought I’d lost you… again!” Zoe said.

“I guess that one never wears off, does it?” Aaron said with a smirk.

“One of these days you’ll be gone and I won’t even blink!” Zoe said.

“Till you realize we really are gone that time,” Aaron said.

Zoe laughed, but it turned to tears.

“Mom, I was only joking,” Aaron said.

“I know,” Zoe said. “I just never want to lose you.”

She hugged him to her, running her hands through his hair and clutching him tight. Bryan hugged Cassie. He caught Rosetta’s eye and smiled.

“Thank you,” he said.

“It should be me thanking them,” Rosetta said. “If it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t be here.”

62.

LADY MALTESE watched from the safety of the balcony of her cave apartment, high in the mountain's wall. She couldn't believe what she had just seen. Her pet, her beloved monstrosity, the one she had kitted out and turned into an even more dangerous beast, had been swatted from the sky. She had heard it land, thudding heavily into the earth like a fallen comet.

She'd immediately moved for her amulet and began pressing buttons, but there was no response, no reply. Nothing. She no longer had control.

She let out a scream that echoed through the catacombs. She took off her amulet and smashed it on the floor. She leapt upon it, crushing it beneath her boots, screaming and crying in the same breath.

Everything she had worked for, everything she had done, had all been destroyed. But she wasn't finished yet. She was in her cave. She would use the resources she had to create more weapons. There was more than one way to destroy a town. She would revert to ancient methods, like poisoning the wells, if she had to.

She turned back to the cavern and began sorting through the piles of metal toys she'd fashioned. They had razor-sharp blades around the bottom and helicopter propellers on the top.

Let's see how they deal with my little hellion copters, Lady Maltese thought with a smile.

Something moved behind her. She spun around, withdrawing the knife she kept up her sleeve.

"I know you're there," Lady Maltese said. "You don't spend a lifetime in the shadows without knowing when someone is in them."

There was a pause, and then something began to move. A figure emerged into the light, on the edge of darkness. It was a cowled figure. The one who referred to himself as the Cursed One.

Lady Maltese lowered her knife, her eyes wide and fearful.

"I… I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know it was you."

"Clearly," the Cursed One said. "Judging by the events taking place outside, you have a great deal on your plate."

"I do," Lady Maltese said. "But nothing I can't handle."

“No?” the Cursed One said. “It looks like you’ve lost control of the situation to us.”

“No,” Lady Maltese said. “I can get it back. I can always get it back.”

The Cursed One extended his gloved hands in an apologetic gesture.

“But what business is it of ours?” he said. “You may conduct your business any which way you like. What may be seen as a failure to us may be seen as a supreme success to others.”

“It’s *not* failure,” Lady Maltese said vehemently. “It’s a setback.”

“Of course,” the Cursed One said.

Lady Maltese could practically taste the bitterness in his voice.

“But your… setback has put a wrinkle in our plans,” the Cursed One said. “You were meant to join us. We have been recruiting from all known worlds. You alone were entrusted with our pods, but one was stolen and destroyed. And so your spot is gone.”

“I don’t want a spot,” Lady Maltese said. “I want to stay here and rule.”

The Cursed One paced up and down the modest cave apartment, furnished with some of the finest items from the castle.

“Some time ago we came to you with a proposition,” he said. “You required a problem, and we provided you with one. It was up to you to make the most of it. You were told that later, one day, you would pay us back. And we returned.”

Lady Maltese remembered the night.

It had felt colder than usual, the dark full of more fear than she was used to. The darkness had moved and the Cursed One presented himself. He had come to call in the favor she owed him. Lady Maltese had braced herself, ready for it to be something she did not want to give.

Then he surprised her.

“I want a submersible built,” he’d said. “Twenty-five to be exact. They will travel underwater at great depth. They will be fitted with a weapon capable of anti-grav capacity.”

Lady Maltese took a moment to comport herself. It had been a while since she had needed to use the creative part of her brain.

“Although the submersible could be built, the weapon would be impossible,” she’d said. “Anti-gravity technology will not have reached that level of sophistication yet, and I would never be able to reproduce it.”

The Cursed One’s face was covered, but Lady Maltese could hear the smile in his voice.

“All necessary materials will be provided,” he’d said. “You need only design the craft blueprints and build the weapons once we have provided you with the requisite material.”

Lady Maltese agreed, and got to work designing the pods immediately. She drafted and redrafted until they were perfect. Once she was done, she went over them again until she could not see a single flaw with them. She did not want to fail the Cursed One.

The Cursed One was evidently in no great hurry. It was then Lady Maltese realized she had been given no deadline to create the design. It made no difference. She always worked on designs immediately. Always had done. It was her process. Then she realized with mounting dread that perhaps that was the reason for why the Cursed One had left her alone. He knew how she worked.

One day, perhaps six months after the Cursed One had made his demands, he returned. He came with a material he described as ‘Gravitas’. He left her with it and took the designs away with him. He left her to experiment with the material by herself.

It was extraordinary.

Lady Maltese had placed the material on a table and watched as every other object in the room rolled toward it, gaining in speed until they attached themselves to the rock. Lady Maltese was flabbergasted.

This was not possible, and yet here it was before her, working. She had never encountered a material like this her whole life, had never even dreamed such a thing might exist. But yet here it was.

Shaping it had been simple. It was rock, and any mason could have done it. Lady Maltese had the best mason in their world work on it under the pretense it was for her husband’s fortieth birthday.

The real difficulty came with controlling the power, either by enhancing it, or reducing it when required. She stumbled upon the rock’s greatest ability by accident, almost knocking her unconscious in the process.

She had managed to reverse the polarization. Not only could she use the rock to draw objects toward herself, but also repel objects away. It was a breakthrough that would help control the pods the weapons were attached to.

In a single stroke, it would not only operate as a weapon, but as a defence too—by repelling and pushing away any objects or weapons

hurled at it. It would allow the driver to operate the pod more efficiently and with greater control.

What the Cursed One wanted these pods for, Lady Maltese didn't know. She refused to even speculate. She kept her head down and focused on the job in hand. She couldn't wait for their dealings to be over. The Cursed One gave Lady Maltese goosebumps.

The second part of their deal was for her to store the pods in the caves while she attached the weapons.

"We had an agreement," the Cursed One said.

"I have carried out my side of the bargain to the best of my abilities," Lady Maltese said.

"Then you have not carried them out adequately," the Cursed One said. "You were to store the pods for safe keeping until we needed them. And for your failure to comply, you must be punished."

Lady Maltese lashed out with the knife. It was a fast and vicious blow. The Cursed One clutched his throat, blood pulsing out over his black gloves.

Lady Maltese was panting, not with exertion, but shock and surprise. She had never thought she could vanquish the Cursed One so easily. She smiled, a mad maniacal grin that stretched from one ear to the other. She had won! She had killed him! She let out a girlish squeal of glee and wrapped her hands around her mouth.

The Cursed One was not as unassailable as she had thought. He was just a man. And all the nightmares she had had about him over the years, him as a dark and evil spirit—clearly some of their world and its superstitions had rubbed off on her—had all been for nought. He was just a man. Nothing but a piddling nothing of a man.

Lady Maltese gasped, a sharp intake of breath. She reached behind herself, for what she felt—a painful pinch just under her ribs. She'd backed herself right onto it, whatever it was.

She found something was protruding from her body, something alien that did not belong there. She reached back and pulled it out. She felt the pain and ejection of her warm blood. She let out a cry and raised the blade to her face.

It was her own blade.

No, she thought. *It can't be. I dropped it. I dropped it right there…*

She looked at the floor, at the spot her blade should have been and found… nothing. Nothing protruded from the shadows on the floor. Her blade had been taken and then held at her back so she might impale herself onto it. Which meant someone must have held it for her to impale herself on in the first place.

She spun, her hands coming around to form fists. She screamed when she saw the one who had stabbed her. It was the Cursed One.

“No,” Lady Maltese said. “You’re dead. I slashed open your throat. Your drops of blood are still on the flagstone floor.”

“You cannot kill what is everlasting,” the Cursed One said. “When we carry weapons to protect ourselves, we are actually carrying the very tools that condemn us.”

Lady Maltese dropped her dagger. The Cursed One moved fast, like a striking snake, caught the knife before it hit the ground, and tossed it at Lady Maltese. But it was a bad throw, and it missed her.

Lady Maltese took a moment to comport herself. If the Cursed One could make mistakes, perhaps there was a way out of this for her.

“We can make a new agreement,” Lady Maltese said. “One of mutual benefit to us both.”

“We do not renegotiate,” the Cursed One said.

He stepped into the light. Lady Maltese instinctively stepped back, matching his forward momentum. She flinched again. This time she did not need to look back at what she had walked into.

She stepped forward and spun around, and in doing so, the knife—her knife—that had punctured her body on the other side, was removed. It dripped dark red with her blood.

Another figure stepped from the shadows, another Cursed One. Identical to the first two.

“You cannot kill what does not exist in a single body,” the third Cursed One said.

Lady Maltese was beginning to feel weak with loss of blood. She was bleeding badly from the two wounds to her person. Her dress was becoming heavy. She turned to run for the door. Anything was better than where she was and what was going to happen to her if she didn’t escape.

She caught sight of a glint of light off her blade as it spun through the air and disappeared into the shadow in front of her. She skidded to a halt, but not fast enough, as her own blade was caught and protruded from the

darkness. Her body slid slowly and painfully onto it, like a hot knife into butter.

Another Cursed One stepped forward.

“You cannot kill what cannot be killed,” he said.

It was over. She was not going to survive.

“This is impossible,” Lady Maltese said.

“Everything is impossible until you know how to make it possible,” the Cursed One said.

The Cursed One took the blade and sliced it across the palm of his hand. His blood mingled with hers on the edge of the knife.

“As you have taken one of our number from us, I’m afraid you must take his place,” the Cursed One said. “A pity—for you. You could have avoided this with death. Instead, you will become one of us.”

He sliced open one of Lady Maltese’s cheeks. The wound burned red raw. At first the pain went unnoticed by Lady Maltese in comparison with her other wounds, but as she lay there, and the seconds ticked by, the wound festered and turned her skin black. It raced across her skin like a flood across a great plain.

“What… did you do… to me?” Lady Maltese said. “What did… you do?”

Her skin turned coal black and reached her lips. She could no longer speak. Her eyes rolled back, her vision turning dark. All was black.

63.

AFTER BURYING the dead, it took the whole town five days to search every tunnel of the cave. Their search found nothing, besides the weird twisted machine the dragon had used to skin his victims, a device the butchers of the town found very useful to prepare their own meat products.

Everything else, if there had been anything else, was gone. Even the pods that had stood in a long row were gone. Most important of all, despite searching every inch of the caves, there was no Passage to be found.

Roland, after taking up his father's mantle, promised to search them again once they had rebuilt the town. Bryan suspected it was going to be a waste of time, but he didn't say anything.

Lord Maltese never fully recovered from the shock of his wife's misdemeanors. He was a shell of the man he had been, mumbling under his breath and constantly lost in a daze.

The metal of Lady Maltese's other machines was repurposed and reforged into a giant muzzle that kept the T-Rex's jaws restrained. Bryan was able to build a new antennae and remote control device. The T-Rex became more sedate after that. The locals still needed to be persuaded the dragon wasn't some kind of mystical being.

There was one discovery the family did not overlook.

"Oh my God," Zoe said. "Bryan. Look at this. It's the same figure."

Bryan looked with the air of someone who didn't believe what he was hearing, his eyes drooping at the corners. When he laid eyes on the image, a visible shiver went through him.

"I think I just peed a little," Bryan said.

"Someone—or something—has been visiting all these worlds," Zoe said. "A black cowled figure. What could it mean?"

"Who could it be?" Cassie said.

"I'm sure I have no idea," Zoe said. "But he must have been coming here for quite some time if it is the same guy."

They all peered at the black cowled figure scrawled on the cave wall, a million and one possibilities going through their minds. None of them could prepare them for the truth.

ROSETTA and the family spent several days searching the rolling farmland for the Passage until Aaron finally hit upon the solution.

“Lady Maltese had parachutes made, and the dinosaur could fly, so why couldn’t the Passage be on the roof?”

It was crazy, mad, impossible, and yet they found no argument to be made for it not to be so. It turned out to be in the first place they looked: in the center of the world’s roof, like an upside down sink, the hole in the middle.

“Thar she is,” Bryan said.

“The only question is, how do we get up there?” Zoe said.

“Fly, of course,” Cassie said.

It took Bryan two days to teach Roland how to use the remote control device. Bryan had shaped it into a PlayStation controller, assuming it would be more intuitive for him to learn. He turned out to be wrong.

Rosetta and the family climbed aboard the T-Rex dressed in comfortable clothes, armed with a backpack each, full of the finest food from the town. The locals’ way of apologizing for their behavior of late.

The T-Rex growled and threw back its head when it caught sight of the family. The meal that had gotten away. Roland tapped at the controls like a pro. The T-Rex shook its head and turned away.

A set of low chairs had been installed on the T-Rex’s back. It looked pretty flimsy to Bryan. Each chair was set behind a vertebrate.

Roland pressed a button, and the T-Rex coiled up its powerful legs and leapt into the air. They ascended into the sky with a few flaps of the dinosaur’s wings, up to the ceiling. The T-Rex floated on a powerful updraft just below the Passage.

Rosetta and the family each shook Roland and Abigail’s hand and took turns to ascend into the Passage. They were old hands at it by now.

“I wouldn’t send anyone through this Passage just yet,” Bryan said.

“Why not?” Roland said. “It would be good for us to explore.”

“Trust me,” Bryan said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Give it another couple hundred years. Minimum.”

Bryan passed into the Passage. They were gone.

ROLAND pressed at the controls and lowered the T-Rex back to the field beside the town. The T-Rex would be of great use to the people. It could carry heavy weights and aid them in their rebuilding efforts.

Roland mounted his horse and trotted back to the town at a leisurely pace. He thought about the family and everything that had happened in such a short space of time. It shouldn't be forgotten, he decided. But how to ensure the people never forgot?

They could build a statue to the occasion. He shook his head. Statues were too easily destroyed, as they had seen. It would need to be a song. He would get the minstrels to work on one. But no, not everyone could sing well. He wanted *everyone* to recall this story.

Story.

That was what it would be. A tale. A thrilling adventure about a family, a monster, and an evil ruler.

But how to begin such a tome?

He smiled. That was easy. The story would begin the same way so many of the most unforgettable stories began.

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A sinkhole is a natural phenomenon. It can happen anywhere, anytime. It drinks lakes dry, consumes jungles, and even demolishes entire mountains. You may have seen one in your street. But these things aren't lost. They've simply been moved. Things are forgotten on the surface all the time. Beneath the crust, they're always remembered.

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Books 4, 5 and 6 are currently being written!

In the Skip series (3 books)

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The clock tower is the center of the town of Time. It counts down the hours, minutes and seconds of every passing day. But unbeknownst to the local inhabitants, it is at the center of a great deal more than that. It is the center of the universe and controls time itself. But it is old and beginning to break, sending the world's inhabitants skipping forward and back through time.

Can two teenagers on the run collect all three replacement clock pieces scattered across the world before the clock tower, and time, breaks for good?

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Book Two

Elian and Jera head to the Rumble Jungle, the Haunted Forest and Land's End for the replacement clock pieces. Each has been entrusted to ancient and powerful guardians less than willing to hand them over. Can Elian and Jera pass their tests and save the world?

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Book Three

Elian must recruit the help of his former crew to steal the third and final clock piece, housed in the Ascar's private museum. In their escape, Jera is injured. Elian must return to the one place he fears most of all: home.

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In the Z-Minus series (6 books)

Book One

Once infected, the virus shuts down organs, kills nerve impulses and even reprograms the way we think. The virus becomes us. But the process takes eight hours. If you only had eight hours left to live, what would you do?

For Chris Smith, that decision has been made for him. He's infected, and returns home to find the rest of his family undead or missing, save his youngest daughter Maisie. He's never been much of a father, but can he make up for it now in the final few hours of his life and find somewhere safe for her to survive?

Read it free: Z-Minus
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Book Two

Once infected, the virus shuts down organs, kills nerve impulses and even reprograms the way we think. The virus becomes us. But the process takes eight hours. If you only had eight hours left to live, what would you do?

Chris Smith has eight hours to get his infected daughter Maisie to the rumored cure or lose her forever. The only things in his way: a marauding army of killer zombies, a self-declared warrior goddess and a secret buried deep in his past.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Three

Once administered, the cure heals organs, rebuilds neurons, and even reunites us with our consciousness. The cure heals us. But the cure will only exist for the next eight hours. If your daughter had the power to save the world, what would you do?

Chris Smith has eight hours to get his cured daughter Maisie to the research ship anchored off the coast of Brighton or lose the only chance of

salvation the human race has. He must battle raging undead hordes and evade a powerful warrior goddess hell-bent on retaining power in the new world order.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Four

In response to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, a Special Forces team is sent on a military exercise to curtail future outbreaks. But when they encounter infected civilians, they soon discover they've entered a real-life nightmare, and must put their training to the test.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Five

Archie is a state-of-the-art computer system. He can sequence a genome within eight hours. He can upload a virus's make-up into the cloud for research centers all over the world. By the time a dangerous virus arrives, we will already be inoculated against it. Archie will make pandemics obsolete.

Unfortunately for us, he was developed too late.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Six

The ice under Antarctica tells a fascinating story: the Earth's history, revealing its secrets layer by layer. But there is one secret it doesn't yet know, and the researchers at Palmer Station are about to discover it for themselves…

Buy it: US UK CA AU

In the Blood Memory series (9 books)

Book One

Haven's crew discovers a body floating at sea. With a six-year hole in his memory, Jordan remembers nothing of the Incident or the creatures that have claimed the land as their own. He joins the crew in their daily struggle to survive in a harsh new world where every meal is live or die.

But when a shipwreck forces them from the safety of the sea the crew soon discover their pursuers aren't the only monsters out to get them.

Begin reading it free: Blood Memory: Book One
Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Two

The survivors of the shipwreck coalesce on land to face the horror that lives there, only to find one of their number missing. They wait for three days, with disastrous consequences.

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Book Three

The survivors head onto the land to get the supplies they need for their long journey ahead, and meet a patrol of soldiers from the nearby Burgh Castle compound. Almost back to their boat, the survivors are set upon by an endless wave of Lurchers.

Trapped and held by the creatures, the survivors fear it is the end. But then one Lurcher steps from amongst the others, and the survivors realize their ordeal has only just begun.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Four

The survivors embark on their journey to the Indian Ocean. They make their way around the coast of France, Spain, and the Strait of Gibraltar.

And every step of the way they hear rumors of a darkness rising in the west from a source that sounds only too familiar.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Five

The survivors' plan to raise the fee for the Suez Canal went awry. Now they are at the whim of the son of the king they have been framed for murdering. Meanwhile, Jessie confronts Ori, with near-disastrous consequences.

The survivors are chased through the Suez Canal, King Haji hot on their heels. Finally arriving at the Red Sea, within sight of the Indian Ocean, they're confronted by two of their enemies. But which two?

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Six

During his long journey to safer seas, Jordan thought about only one thing: what he would do to the overlord responsible for his horrifying torture.

Tim says his Dark Days are behind him, that he was in thrall to what he refers to as 'the Darkness'. He has a plan to restore what humanity lost, a plan that requires Jordan, Anne and Jessie's help.

Will they assist him? Has he really shed this evil 'Darkness' presence? Or is this all part of his revenge for what he lost at Burgh Castle?

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Seven

On their journey to battle ever more powerful overlords, Tim and the survivors come across a man with revenge in his heart, out to kill the overlord who took his family from him. He's a loose cannon and threatens to ruin everything they have achieved so far.

Meanwhile, as Tim's power grows, so too is the Darkness inside him, twisting him into the monster he once was. But is he strong enough to prevent it from happening again?

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Eight

After discovering Sam's immunity to the virus, the survivors have a difficult decision to make: to continue on their journey of increasing their army and power, or to take Sam back to Utopia and its organisation of scientists.

They opt for both. Jordan returns Sam to the haven so they might make full use of his blood, but meets resistance in a form he could have never anticipated.

Meanwhile, Anne, Jessie and Tim continue on their journey across Asia, to grow their force to take on the Chinese overlords Fang and Wei. But the powerful do not get where they are by accident, and Fang takes matters into her own hands to deal with this powerful foreign young upstart.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Nine

Tim is trapped in his own consciousness, his comatose body protected by Jordan. Fang is beating on the door to Tim’s inner Fortress, close to discovering where Jordan is hiding his body. Gaining entrance to either will seal Tim’s fate, as well as that of the world.

But a secret is lurking about Fang that propels the survivors onto their final expedition: to defeat the all-powerful Wei. They must race against time before he becomes the Master Overlord and claims the world as his own.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

In the Swiss Family RobinZOM series (3 books)

Book One

Trapped aboard a ferry destined for their new life in the Philippines, the Robinsons learn of the virus sweeping across the planet. Early symptoms include a hacking cough, shortness of breath, and deathly pale skin. The exact same symptoms shared by a fellow passenger.

Read it free: The Swiss Family RobinZOM
Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Two

Marooned on a stranded island, the Robinson family must learn to survive in their new alien surroundings. They forage for food, filter water, and face dangerous predators. But they're about to discover they aren't the only ones to have survived The Long Journey disaster...

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Book Three

The Robinsons are rebuilding their lives after surviving the recent zombie onslaught. They've rebuilt their treehouse, fixed the water supply, begun to farm again, and carry out dangerous scouting missions to sweep up the last of the zombies. Just when everything is going well they each catch a terrible illness. They're in a race against time to discover their illness's cure before it's too late.

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Standalone Novels

Keeping Mum

When modern-day Scrooge Hetty Loveridge saw the opportunity to exploit an inheritance tax loophole for her children, she took it. She need only live seven more years. One week shy, she keels over, dead.

With their inheritance at stake, Peter and Kate get more than they bargained for as they attempt to fool the tax-man into believing their mother is still alive.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

Square

They **beat** him. They **broke** him. They **stabbed** him. They **murdered** him. If they did that to your loved one, would you forgive them? Or would you get **Square**?

Tony Green was recently released having served a four-year prison sentence for murder. With the support of a loving fiancée he attempts to prevent the next generation from following in his own footsteps. But old habits die hard, and the allure of the underworld is hard to resist.

Buy it: US UK CA AU

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Perrin Briar is the author of the popular Blood Memory, Z-Minus and Swiss Family RobinZOM series. He makes his online home at www.perrinbriar.com. You can connect with Perrin on Twitter at @perrinbriar, on Facebook at facebook.com/perrinbriar and you should send him an email at perrin@perrinbriar.com if the mood strikes you.

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